ROBOTS AND MAGIC

VOLUME 2

SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF

LESTER DEL REY

ROBOTS AND MAGIC

With a career spanning seven decades, Lester del Rey had the opportunity to write stories that covered the breadth of the science fiction and fantasy genres. *Robots and Magic* collects thirty-four of those stories, including the rare "Fade-Out," his famed "Helen O'Loy," and his final story, "The Fairy Godmother," to show how this Grand Master handled everything from a romance between a human and a dryad to a civilization of robots bent on vengeance.

Our world needs heroes, but what happens when a veteran of a bloody conflict returns home decades later, to find that the sacrifice his friends made may have been in vain? Del Rey follows such a heart-broken soldier in "Though Poppies Grow."

For millennia, the little folk have co-existed with human kind, but changes in technology may spell the end of this symbiotic relationship. The elf Ellowan finds himself thrust into a world in which new technologies have rendered his trade obsolete in "The Coppersmith" and "Doubled in Brass."

What does it mean to be human? To be sentient? Old Pete, a robot on Mars, must prove his worth and his independence in order to avoid the ignominy of destruction in the scrap yard in "Robots Should Be Seen."

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by Lester Del Rey

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Melanie and Robin
and, eternally,
Elaine

and with thanks to
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Remembering Lester

I knew Lester del Rey both personally and professionally during the last twenty years of his life, but I had been reading his fiction long before then. Like most boys who grew up during the 1950s when the United States and Russia were engaged in an intense competition to launch space satellites and ultimately to be the first to put a man on the moon, I was reading everything there was to read in the field of science fiction. In those days, there wasn't as much of it as there is now, either in novels or short stories, so you could pretty much work your way through the whole backlist in about two years and still stay on top of what was just coming out. Among those authors I read, of those who captured my imagination with tales of space jockeys and robots and strange creatures from our world and others, was Lester del Rey.

I discovered him through his short fiction first, in the science fiction magazines and periodicals that published monthly or quarterly. I can still remember reading "Helen O'Loy" and "The Years Draw Nigh" and desperately wishing that I could write something that would impact readers in the way these stories impacted me. I was already writing at the age of ten, envious of those who were doing so for a living, wanting to master their skills, wanting to be like them. Writing was a mystery and a challenge, and it offered an opportunity to create something wonderful. Among those writers I admired and sought to emulate was Lester del Rey.

What's the old saying? Be careful what you wish for?

When I finally met Lester, many years later, he was both everything I could have hoped for and nothing of what I had expected. He was such a contradiction that I don't think I was ever sure, right up to the end of his life, what to make of him. Physically, he was short and slender, almost frail, and had an old man's elfin features. In all the time I knew him, he never seemed to age. Arguing was his favorite pastime. Arguing about anything. He knew a good deal about a whole raft of esoteric subjects—or at least he made an impressive show of it—so there was never a time when he wasn't ready to debate a point. His favorite trick was to advance an argument until suddenly you found that somehow he had switched positions on you, and you had taken his side of the argument and he had taken yours! I know how impossible it sounds, but I've been party to that experience on more occasions than I care to remember, so I know it's true.

He was a generous teacher and mentor, but he was a tough taskmaster. As one of his first authors after the founding of the Del Rey imprint at Ballantine Books, I found that out pretty early on. He held you up to a high standard, no matter who you were. He expected you to do your best, and if he didn't think you had done so, he would tell you to go back and do it again. He wouldn't tell you how to do it necessarily, but he would tell you why it needed doing. If you could convince him otherwise, he would let you off the hook. That didn't happen often for any author I knew and certainly not me.

Once, in a moment of supreme agony over some dispute or other, I called his wife, Judy-Lynn del Rey, Editor-in-Chief at Del Rey Books, and complained that Lester was being unreasonable. He was clearly in the wrong and would not admit it. Without missing a beat she said, "Brooks, listen to me. Lester is always right. Always."

Lester carried a business card that he passed out to all and sundry. It read: **Lester del Rey, Expert**. It made sense. What else would you put on your business card when you knew you were always right?

Whether he was right all of the time or not, as a science fiction writer Lester knew his stuff. Enough so that he had no patience with writers who played at writing science fiction where the science was flawed. His own science was meticulously researched, and he was always more than willing to show that it was accurate. He read other science fiction writers religiously and loved pointing out where they had failed to adhere to established scientific principles and had instead gone off on a tangent that was demonstrably nonsensical or, conversely, where their science was solid and they had done their jobs.

Surprisingly, Lester was self-deprecating about his own work, his pride in the accuracy of his science notwithstanding. He told me on more than one occasion that he didn't expect his work to survive him many years beyond his death. He thought his stories were passably good, but nothing more. He felt his best work was in editing other authors. Those who worked closely with him agreed that he was a marvelous editor and story doctor. Owen Lock, who was Judy-Lynn's assistant when I came to Del Rey Books and later became my editor, once told me that he thought Lester was the best editor he had ever known.

Without taking anything away from his talent as an editor, I don't think Lester gave himself enough credit as a writer. I think the two went hand in hand. I think it was his editorial skills that allowed him to successfully construct his fiction. Lester understood what worked for his readers, what would prove compelling to them, what it was about story and character that would capture their interest. What distinguished his stories from those of a host of other writers in the field of science fiction are his keen perceptions about the nature of the human condition. You read them for the twists and turns that catch readers and often the characters, as well, by surprise. You read them like you would mysteries, waiting for their secrets to reveal themselves. Whether about aliens or humans or something in between, his stories reflect the poignancy of revelations that things are not as we believe, as in "Instinct." They reflect the author's empathy with the fear and disgust that so often accompany the unpleasantness of self-discovery, as in "And the Truth…" ("Dead Ringer"). They remind us, as in "Vengeance is Mine," how Man is his own worst enemy.

But you can decide for yourself. Here are samples of the writing that established him more than fifty years ago as a writer of talent and insight. Will his fiction not survive him much beyond his death? You can make up your own minds about this, too. But my guess is that the man who was right all the time otherwise was wrong about this.

–Terry Brooks
September 2009

A Code for Sam

I

It was hours after the cave-in before the first sounds of rescue reached Sam. He switched his brain back to high amperage drain to come fully alert and began sending more current through his body heaters to prepare for emergence. From the nearness of the digging, there could be only a few feet of rubble left in the collapsed tunnel.

Fifteen minutes later, he felt a pick strike near his outstretched hand. He grabbed it and pulled himself out of the dirt and gravel around him, then scrambled quickly forward to the entrance. Surprisingly, it was a human hand that reached out to help him to his feet.

"You okay, Sam?" Barney Collins asked. The wizened old prospector's face and oxygen mask were filthy with sweat and dust, but concern showed plainly in his eyes.

Sam nodded. "I'm fine, Barney. What happened to Pete?"

"The new robot?" Barney shoved his mask aside and spat out tobacco juice, then shrugged. "Something funny about him. Came into camp hours ago, but never said a word about you till we got worried and asked. Come on, we better get back in the digger before it gets colder."

Sam glanced about, to see that the day was almost done. The high ceremonial mounds were casting long shadows as Tau Ceti sank in the east, and the thin air was already losing heat. In another hour, the temperature would be forty below zero. At its best, Anubis was a hostile world even to a robot like Sam, totally unlike the lovely second planet men called Isis. Here, except for the Gregg Archeological Expedition, there were only a few prospectors and trappers, with a small spaceport and trading post at Ramses to service them.

Their digger was a converted prospector tank with a larger cabin and a collapsible shovel crane on top. Inside, Barney threw off his mask and began washing it hastily, while Sam lifted his chestplate and switched to freshly charged batteries. The man turned on the headlight, then swung the vehicle on its caterpillar treads to head back toward the camp, some four miles away.

"A lot of trolls showing up," he muttered. "Too blamed many."

A dozen natives could be seen in the headlight beams as he spoke, moving aside to let the digger pass. Their snarling, vulpine faces stared fixedly at the machine. They stood three feet high, with bodies like pears mounted on pipestem legs and with arms that nearly touched the ground. A greenish fur stood out several inches as insulation against the cold. All were armed with spears and heavy stone hammers, and some had bows slung over their backs. There were no young among them.

Sam shared none of Barney's prejudice against the trolls, but he felt a growing unease as they passed another armed group. In the years he had worked with Gregg to untangle the lost past of Anubis, he had encountered no real threat from them. But their sullen legends were full of violence, and most of it centered here at the Burial Mounds of the Rock Devils where the expedition was digging.

The men were just sitting down to eat as they entered the main expedition Quonset. Barney took his seat between the gray form of James Gregg and the heavy figure of his former prospecting partner, Yeng Lee. Across the table, young Dickson sat alone. He had joined them with the PT model robot two days before, unasked but bearing authorization from the Earth university that was funding them. The space he'd taken in the supply truck hadn't made him any more welcome. And now his face was flushed with heat from some argument that had been going on before Sam arrived.

Gregg motioned for Sam to take one of the chairs. "All right, now maybe we'll get some sense out of it. Sam, what happened to you? Dickson here won't let me question Pete properly."

"I have every authority to retain full control over Pete, as you know, Dr. Gregg," Dickson said in a tone he tried to keep patient. He had moved away slightly as Sam dropped beside him, a gesture that betrayed his Earth origin even more than his accent. "Pete is an important experimental model. I cannot let him be ruined by improper handling."

Sam broke in quickly to tell what he could, but he wasn't entirely sure himself. He'd been digging a tunnel into the core of a new mound after instructing Pete in the placement of temporary shoring. There had been the sound of strain on one section, and he'd yelled for Pete to get under it and support it until new bracing could be added. Then the whole roof came down, trapping him.

"The cave-in may have started before Pete could reach it," Sam finished. He didn't believe it, but his back had been turned at the time. "But Jim, I—"

Gregg interrupted impatiently. "All right, we'll let that go. But I want to know why he abandoned you there and then didn't report when he got back! Well, Dr. Dickson?"

"I won't even discuss it before another robot," Dickson said.

Gregg's fist hit the table with a blow that made the dishes jump. "By Horus, Dickson, one more crack like that and you'll be walking back to Ramses, fund or no fund! Sam's my second in-command here, as well as a friend of mine. Pete, come out here!"

"Easy, Jim," Barney said quietly. "The kid's from Earth and doesn't know any better. Give him time."

Gregg's face lost some of its tenseness. He fumbled in his pocket and dragged out a cigarette, tapping it sharply against the table. He was just lighting it when Pete emerged from the kitchen.

Then the new robot was across the main room at a single leap, and his fingers were tearing the cigarette out of Gregg's mouth. He dropped it onto the packed dirt floor and ground it out with his heel.

"Cigarettes are harmful to human beings, Master," he said in his gentle, monotonous voice.

II

Dickson had jumped to his feet and covered the robot's body with his own before Gregg could push up from the chair. Now he began shoving Pete from the room, saying something in words too low for the others to hear. Then he was back, looking acutely embarrassed.

"I'm sorry—very sorry. He won't do that again. I've told him that cigarettes are only harmful on Earth—quite healthful here." He sighed and groped backwards for his chair. "I—I guess I'd better explain, even though it may contaminate our experiment."

Gregg took a long time lighting another cigarette. Finally he nodded stiffly. "Yes, Dr. Dickson, I think perhaps you'd better."

Dickson began awkwardly with needless background and too much bias. Robots were produced by Earth companies and leased from them, but nearly all were used in space, where they could cope with hostile environments better than men. As a result, most Earthmen had never seen a robot, and inexperience left them prey to every fantasy from the ancient horror films. And, of course, occasionally a robot did injure a human, with sensational headlines in all Earth newspapers.

"So we had to make robots safe for Earth," Dickson went on. "To do that, we had to devise a foolproof code of ethics for them."

"Maybe you'd better find a decent code of ethics for humans and use that," Barney suggested.

Dickson smiled dutifully. “It wouldn’t work. Men’s ethics revolve around instinctual social drives; but robot brains contain only what is put into them during their education programs. Hence we must have precise rules that can be completely conditioned into them. Fortunately, I was able to discover such laws in the same literature which enabled Dr. Sorrenson to discover our faster-than-light drive.”

They might have guessed it. After Sorrenson invented the space drive and publicly admitted he’d taken the idea from an old science-fiction story, a lot of the borderline sciences had leaped onto the bandwagon. Nobody had yet found anything else useful, but it was a good way to get research money now.

“Good Lord!” The anger on Gregg’s face had been replaced by a growing amazement. “The three laws of the Asenion robots! I read about them up in my grandfather’s attic when I was a kid. Don’t tell me you took those plot tricks seriously?” He closed his eyes, trying to remember. “A robot must not inflict or permit harm to a human; subject to that law, a robot must obey human orders; and subject to both laws, a robot must protect itself. Right?”

“Not precisely. But in general—”

“Slavery and racism!” Lee spat the words out. “A black slave must not strike a white master; a black slave must obey a white master’s orders; a black slave must protect itself as part of its white master’s property. You call that *ethics*?”

“I don’t think the author meant them that way, Lee. They were just things he could build plots on, for fun,” Gregg said.

The big man grimaced. “Fun! I suppose having Pete call every human *Master* is an Earthman’s idea of fun, too?”

“Unfortunately, it probably is.” Gregg turned back to Dickson, and his face was completely sober. “Naturally, you had to train Pete to be as literal minded as most of the fictional robots. Any flexibility or judgment would have ruined your precious code. Poor Pete! Without human orders, he had to run away from any danger in the tunnel to protect himself. The robot Sam meant nothing in his code. And then, because he probably knew he’d done something wrong, he had to protect himself further by making no report until ordered to do so. Give him a month of normal work in conflict with your code, and Pete’s going to be hopelessly insane—maybe dangerously so. Dr. Dickson, your experiment’s finished. Until you can leave, you’ll keep Pete under close supervision, confined to the kitchen.”

"No!" Sam put a heavy hand on Dickson's shoulder and shoved the white-faced man back into his chair before angry words could spill from his lips. "No, I'm going to need Pete in the new tunnel tomorrow. And I'll need Dr. Dickson to make him obey my orders."

Gregg shook his head. "Impossible. Sam, you don't know what you'd be letting yourself in for."

"Then I'll have to risk it. No, wait. You were all so busy arguing about Pete's ethics that I never got a chance to finish my report. Jim, this isn't like the tunnels we've dug through all the other mounds. It's—"

"King Tut's Tomb!"

Sam nodded. "Maybe. At least I've struck against some kind of a metal barrier less than half way through the mound."

Then the men were clustering around him, pounding him on the back and yelling for the few details he could give. Even Dickson began to catch the feeling, though his eyes kept darting back to the metal hand that had rested so rudely on his shoulder.

Later, when the men had finally retired to their bunks, Sam had time to let the contagion of their enthusiasm drain away and to get back to his private doubts. He moved out into the freezing night, staring at the ring of eyes around the Quonset. The trolls were still gathering here, armed and waiting. As he watched, a new group moved up and found places to huddle, only few hundred yards from the camp.

Fifteen years, he thought as he went back into the dim main room. Long years while Gregg and he tracked down tiny bits of evidence that seemed to indicate the trolls had somehow reached a brief period of high culture a thousand years before. A worn bit of metal knife blade; a chipped burning glass that still worked; the divergent legends of the Killing of the Rock Devil and the yearly ceremony of mound building. And then the final discovery.

Lee and Barney, returning from prospecting, had found a battered metal object sticking out of one mound. They hadn't considered it important enough to mark the mound, but they'd taken it to Gregg at Ram. When finally opened, it contained nearly two hundred well preserved sheets of paperlike material covered with writing.

Sam took out a set of photocopies and glanced through it. A primitive language changes slowly, and the decoded writing was a phonetic script for early troll speech. He could read most of it now without Gregg's dictionary or notes. But he couldn't accept it.

Without leaving evidence of a technology capable of building huge telescopes, how could any culture write a simplified text on astronomy that described the various galaxies and the evolution of stars? How could such a culture refine and alloy aluminum and then roll it out to make the flat sheet that formed a barrier in the tunnel?

If the ancestors of the trolls had achieved all that once, who could hope to guess what they might do now?

On impulse, Sam carried the photocopy back into the kitchen where Pete was still sitting. There was time enough before morning for a PT robot to master Old Trollish, and the ability might prove useful later. At least it would fill Pete's time better than brooding about his code of ethics.

III

In the morning, the trolls seemed to have filled the whole area. They made no hostile move as the expedition party began unloading the digger and carrying shoring supplies up to the tunnel, but hundreds of eyes followed every move.

Gregg had been conferring with a couple of old trolls he had recognized, but now that conference seemed to be over. He was staring into the tunnel mouth cautiously as Sam and Pete climbed up to it with a load of shoring. He slipped the flashlight off its hook and began crawling forward, obviously trying to catch a glimpse of the other end. Pete watched intently until the man was nearly inside the entrance. Then he dropped the last of his load and dashed forward to drag Gregg back.

"You might be hurt, Master. It isn't safe in there," he warned the man gently.

Surprisingly, Gregg grinned slightly. "Oh hell, maybe you're right this time, Pete. Go back to work, and I'll behave."

He waited until he was alone with Sam and then gestured toward the tunnel. "You're going to need a lot more material than we brought to shore that up safely. The whole mound above it looks unstable. Think you can make out all right while we pull material out of Lee's last dig?"

"I think so," Sam told him. "So far, Dickson's lecture to Pete about following my orders seems to work. What about the trolls?"

"They've been hearing rumors that we're trying to bring the Rock Devil back to life, near as I can make out. I've told them we just want to make sure he's still dead and really kill him if not. They seem willing to accept that, but they're going to stick around to make sure." He shrugged. "Maybe I'd better leave Dickson with you and Pete. He's not much good for work, anyhow."

He slipped over the edge and slid to the surface below. A few minutes later, the digger took off, drawing a small contingent of trolls after it. Most stayed on, keeping their gaze fixed on Dickson and the robot.

There wasn't much Dickson could do. He found a broad rock near the supplies and sat watching as Sam and Pete drew on their grappling mittens and heaved and pulled the heavy sections of wire mesh up to the ledge in front of the tunnel. Finally the work of hauling was finished.

"You go first, Pete," Sam ordered. "I'll back you up."

Pete considered the tunnel and began drawing back from it. "I can't. Yesterday proved that it's too dangerous in there."

Dickson was running toward them, and Pete would follow his orders, of course; the second law took precedence over the third. But Sam had taken enough nonsense. He couldn't depend on calling Dickson to intercede if an accident happened in the tunnel.

He stepped forward, brushing Pete's hesitant arms aside with a savage thrust. His grappling mittens closed firmly over the robot's neck, and he began forcing the claws of the mittens together.

"You're in more danger now than you would be in the tunnel," he told Pete. "You'll have every wire in your neck short-circuited, unless you make up your mind to obey my orders from now on."

Pete's head bobbed as far as it would go. "Yes, Master."

"I'm not your master. I'm just Sam."

"Yes, Sam. I'll go in the tunnel and do what you order."

"Sam, stop it!" Dickson was screaming and struggling to break Sam's grip. "Release him at once, Sam. That's an order!"

Sam let his grip loosen and shoved the man aside. "You'd better get back below, Dr. Dickson. I don't have a second law—maybe not even a first one. If I've got any code at all, you wouldn't know it—because it wouldn't occur to you to ask a normal robot about such things as ethics, would it?"

The brief flush of fright was fading from Dickson's face, to be replaced by a thin smile. "No," he admitted. "It really didn't occur to me. Perhaps I should ask you, some time when we're both not so busy. I'm sure you'd have an interesting answer."

Enlarging and bracing the tunnel was hard, slow work. Pete was no longer affected by the risk, but he was sadly lacking in initiative. After the first few minutes, Sam took the lead position, letting the other robot haul rubble and fetch supplies. By the time the men came back, less than twenty feet had been braced and lined properly with canvas and mesh.

There was room for no more than two in the tunnel, and the robots were better suited than the men for such work. Barney and Lee stayed near the entrance, hauling back baskets of rubble, while Gregg operated the digger shovel occasionally to clear the ledge. The cave-in seemed to have loosened part of the mound above them, and the work became increasingly difficult as they moved further in. It was long after noon before the last section was cleared, to expose a six-foot circle of what seemed to be machine-rolled aluminum sheet that blocked further progress.

Gregg came down to inspect it, tapping the metal doubtfully. "Sounds hollow, and not very thick. Can you cut it?"

"There may be danger for you, Master," Pete warned hesitantly.

Gregg sighed, but stepped back. "All right. I'll keep my oxygen mask tight. Go ahead, Sam, open it!"

If the metal had ever been tempered or work-hardened, time had softened it. While Pete held the light, Sam began cutting it with the mesh nips. He tore the last few feet out and folded the panel back against the tunnel wall.

All the men were crowded into the tunnel by the time he had finished, pressing forward and craning their necks to see what lay beyond. But they waited impatiently while Sam found a place inside for the light and Gregg took the necessary photographs for the record.

Metal walls and roof formed a low dome, not more than twenty feet in diameter. A battered, dented door at one side was flanked by benches that curved along the walls. Opposite the door, hanging shelves rose to a height of six feet. The largest feature of the room was directly in front of those—an enclosed table or desk, with a seat attached to it on a swinging arm. The floor was of metal, strewn with wreckage and damaged machinery.

Sam's eyes swung rapidly over the scene and then centered on the objects scattered across the shelves and spilled onto the floor below. There were dozens of familiar metal containers and other things that could only be books.

He was across the room as soon us the camera stopped clicking, reaching out cautiously for them. Beside him, he heard Gregg's breathing catch. He half expected the book to crumble at his touch, but whatever the paperlike material was seemed proof against time. There was a solid feel to the book and the pages turned easily.

The characters were the same as those of Old Trollish, with two new additions. But the words were totally meaningless.

"Aliens," Gregg said. "They had to be. There isn't a thing in this room designed to fit troll hands or bodies. Let's take a look at the canisters."

Once it was pointed out, the un-trollish nature of everything was obvious. Even the door handle was too high. A man or robot might have sat at the desk Pete and Dickson were inspecting, but no troll could have used the swinging seat.

"Trolls maybe didn't design any of this, but they sure ruined it," Barney called. "Better take a look at this, Jim."

He and Lee had gone at once to examine the wrecked machinery. Now he began pointing out what they had discovered.

The largest piece was obviously some kind of organic fuel cell, with the piping around it reduced to twisted metal shreds. Something with vats and movable flat belts might have been either the source of the plastic paper or a way of printing on it—or both; there wasn't enough left to be sure. And a beautifully simple typewheel writing machine was intact, except for its motor. Half a dozen broken stone axe heads could be seen to show what had caused the damage.

"Looks like they started a news press here, and *vox pop* didn't like the truth," Barney said bitterly. "Every blamed thing that moved is smashed to smithereens."

Gregg nodded thoughtfully. "Well, get what details you can with the camera." He motioned to Dickson, who was watching Pete try to pry open a locked desk drawer. "Give them a hand moving things, will you? I want to find out if there's any information in those canisters."

The containers opened easily to pressure in the right places, and this time the writing was in Trollish. Sam found a text on agriculture, one on metallurgy, and a duplicate of that on astronomy. Then the fourth came open, and he let out a cry for Gregg.

There were two columns this time, one in Trollish and the other in what must be alien words. They flipped through the pages, finding another section with the order reversed. It was obviously a bilingual dictionary, alphabetized for both languages, and covering several thousand words. Two other complete sets of sheets lay behind the first.

"What a Rosetta Stone!" Gregg exulted. He was literally caressing the sheets. "And in triplicate! With this, we'll be reading all those books in a matter of days, Sam. And once—"

A loud crashing sound drowned out the rest of his words. They jerked around to see Pete stamping and leaping madly beside the desk. Dickson shouted an order for him to stop, but the robot went on unheedingly. By the time Sam could reach him, Pete had reduced whatever had been in the opened desk drawer to a mess of plastic lumps and metal scraps that could never have meaning. Then he halted, standing quietly in the ruin he had made.

Dickson approached him, striving for a note of firm command. "I'm giving you an order, Pete. I order you to tell me what that was."

Pete made no answer. He began backing away, shaking his head.

And more orders from Dickson only made him back away faster.

IV

"Oh, let him alone," Gregg said at last. "It's your damned prime law—something that Pete thinks might harm men, obviously. That means anything from the ultimate weapon to some alien dirty picture. And since he thinks telling us would also harm us, we'll never know whether it was important or not. It's my fault for letting a rule- and fool-crippled robot in here and not having him watched. Take him back to the digger, Dr. Dickson."

Lee held out a thick wrist, indicating his watch. "We'd all better go back with the slavemaster, Jim. By the time we can weld some mesh over the entrance to keep trolls out, it'll be night."

Gregg frowned in surprise as he checked his own watch. Then he nodded. He gathered up a set of the dictionary sheets, selected a couple of books at random, and fell in beside Sam as they headed back through the tunnel. But as they neared the entrance, he stopped.

"I think this place is taboo to trolls, even without the gate. But I'll feel better making sure. You go on, Sam."

"You go on. I wasn't planning on getting much sleep tonight, anyhow," Sam told him with heavy sarcasm.

Gregg chuckled. "You're right, of course. Thanks. I'll send down fresh batteries and my rifle before we leave. See you in the morning."

He hurried after the others, and Sam turned back, studying the situation. From the desk, he could see a good distance up the tunnel by arranging the light carefully. And by turning in the seat, he could reach most of the books. He spread out the second word list and prepared to do some serious studying.

Barney brought the rifle and batteries down a quarter hour later. He pulled a sandwich out of his pouch and sat down on the ruined fuel cell to eat it. "They got the gate welded down pretty good," he announced casually.

Sam shook his head gently in the gesture he used where a man would smile. "Thanks, Barney."

"Don't mention it, youngster. Temperature ought to stay comfortable down here, at least." The man finished eating and drew a thin air mattress from his pouch. When it had blown itself up, he began kicking an area free of debris. "Wake me if anything should happen."

Somehow, in spite of the oxygen mask, Barney managed to snore. But Sam was rather glad of the sound. He stared down at the old man fondly, remembering the first human he'd ever loved. Pop had been officially only head janitor of the robot school, but he'd somehow managed to provide an endless stream of games and stories for the students. He'd laughed away their failures and given them all the same advice when they finally graduated. By now, he was a legend among robots, and his words were hallowed in tradition.

Pete had missed all that in his conditioning. It was no wonder he acted more like a half-trained dog than a real person.

At midnight, Sam checked the tunnel. The gate was still secure. It was too dark to spot the trolls, but he could hear them yammering all around, with one repeated cry: *Yar Noo biliyet!* The first two words meant "Rock Devil" and the third was obscene. They were working up to something, but they didn't sound dangerous yet.

He went back to pore over the books. He'd given up any hope of making sense by translation; too many words were missing from the bilingual sheets for immediate sense. He was looking for the few books that had pictures, studying those. One showed a night sky with a star pattern that might help astronomers locate the alien sun. Another yielded several group scenes, and those disturbed him. They showed a dark, graceful people with two legs and four slender arms. But their skins were too smooth, their bodies too similar, and their heads too identically spherical.

"Something eating you, Sam?" Barney asked suddenly. He must have been awake for some time, since he was already chewing away at a cud of tobacco.

Sam shook his head, unwilling to state his suspicions yet.

Barney grunted. "Well, something's eating me. From where I sit, I can see half an inch showing under the bottom plate of your desk, and I want to know what's underneath, holding it up. Think you can move it?"

A minute later, they were looking at the spot where the desk had stood. A smooth, oval hole had been cut through the metal floor and dug into the ground below. Heavy rocks were jammed tightly together to fill it completely.

Barney looked at the rocks and then at the desk that had been placed over them. "Looks like something was meant to stay down there. I got a hunch we're going to have a lot of work getting it out."

It wasn't too hard at first, though some of the stones weighed more than a hundred pounds. But the work increased with depth, and they were eight feet down before they reached the last layer. The men and Pete had already returned in the morning and were clustered around the hole when Sam finally freed what lay at the bottom and passed it up.

The head was no longer spherical, the metal chest was horribly crushed, and most of the brown enamel was gone. But as Barney and Lee stretched it out on the floor, it was still slim and graceful, with two legs and four slender arms, like all the people in the book.

And like them…it was a robot.

"So that's the Rock Devil," Gregg said finally, without surprise.

Dickson was studying it with horrified fascination. "It doesn't look much like rock to me."

"It does to trolls," Sam told him. "If a thing bleeds or gives sap, it's *bel*—food; otherwise, it's *yar*—rock. *Yar* that acts like *bel* is a devil—*noo*—and smart trolls ordinarily look the other way. But this is the ultimate *Yar Noo* and supposed to drive them into a killing rage."

"It's going to complicate our problem, but I guess it's worth the risk," Gregg decided. "Any trouble here last night?"

"No troll trouble. Just a lot of noise."

Gregg frowned. "That's odd. We had a sort of war dance around us all night. Two of the chiefs I know came to warn me that if we didn't make sure the Rock Devil was dead and get out quickly they couldn't control things much longer. I've abandoned camp already. I figured on loading up here and heading south to Ramses at once. But now we've got to smuggle the Rock Devil out. Any idea how?"

"Cover him with a piece of canvas, and I'll carry him down and load him in the digger," Sam suggested. It was the simplest way.

Apparently it was too simple for the others. Eventually they decided to make four drawstring bags from the canvas. One would contain the Rock Devil, and three others would be filled to the same size with everything else. These would be lowered one at a time by crane.

The bag with the Rock Devil would go last, after they saw the troll reaction to the others.

"Pete will have to operate the crane," Gregg decided. "Dickson, you supervise and make sure there are no slip-ups this time. Lee and Barney can improvise the bags, then go down to stow things in the digger. Sam, you'll stay with me and select what we'll take."

The thick canvas bags were clumsy, but they seemed strong enough. Sam bundled the alien into the first to give them a model for the size of the others. Then they began stripping the dome of all of any value. Two books, the writing machine, and Sam's spare batteries were left to be carried out after the bags were safely down. Sam slung the rifle over his shoulder and began moving the sacks to the entrance.

The trolls were about a hundred feet beyond the digger and herded between all the mounds. They kept their fixed stares on the ledge as Sam moved out with a sack, jabbering obscenities, but made no sign of taking other action.

At least Pete could handle simple machine controls well enough. The shovel swung up smoothly to level with the ledge, accepted the first sack from Sam, and carried it down directly to where Lee and Barney were waiting. The trolls hopped about and yelled, but they made no effort to interfere. The second and third sacks followed. Sam waited until all were stowed in the digger before bringing out the one with the alien and dropping it onto the shovel.

The crane drew backwards—and swung suddenly away from the men waiting below! The digger tracks spun into motion, slewing the machine around to face away from tin-mound. Inside it, Sam could see Dickson pounding futilely against Pete's hands. Then the man gave up and ran back to leap for the machine and stumble toward Lee and Barney. Gregg started toward the ledge, but Sam pulled him back.

"We're better off up here, Jim, if there's trouble. Call the others up."

Gregg yelled down, and all three men began climbing toward the ledge. Dickson looked sick as Sam pulled him up the last few feet.

The digger was rolling forward now. Trolls spilled back and aside as it headed for them. The machine drove on for perhaps two hundred feet along the old road toward camp until it came to a rocky section. Then the shovel opened and spilled its contents directly in front of one caterpillar tread. The churning plates of the track hit the sack and began pounding across it, carrying ten tons of weight to grind it against the rock. The digger reversed itself and reversed again. It made six more passes before it stopped and Pete dropped from it. The robot began walking back toward the mound casually. Trolls jittered and then made room for him.

"They didn't spot it," Gregg said suddenly. "They don't know we had the Rock Devil. Sam, if we can get the digger back, we may still get out of this."

Sam nodded and threw his amperage drain to emergency maximum, prepared to drop and run for it. Then he stopped as his heightened hearing brought him the sound of Pete's voice.

The words were in Old Trollish, but the PT brain of the robot had learned the lesson well—and somehow he had managed to guess the cant of primitive oratory. "*Yar Noo alidet!* The Rock Devil is dead! We bound him and cast him from us, we ground him into the dust of the earth, we made him like the grains of sand that blow before the wind. His breath is spent, and his power, forgotten. He cannot rise again!"

There was a delay as the ancient form of the language filtered through to the trolls. Then they were leaping for the area where the digger had destroyed the alien. And a moment later, the message was being relayed forward.

"*Yar Noo alidet! Yar Noo alidet!*"

V

The results came quickly. There was a series of wild cries, and then the trolls were leaping forward toward the mound, drawing their weapons. Bows were lifted, and arrows began whistling through the air. They fell short, but the next flight would reach.

Sam swung his arms, shoving the men down the tunnel. He turned again, yanked the rifle from his back, and sighted quickly. He knew some of the chiefs, and he picked them off while the arrows banged against him. At the death of the fifth chief, the trolls faltered. As the eighth dropped, they began retreating.

He lowered the rifle and stretched out a hand to help Pete up, while Gregg came from the tunnel entrance to join them, then stood watching as the last of the trolls vanished behind the digger and nearby mounds. Now that the first rush had failed, they would spend the day picking new chiefs and yelling their courage back, waiting for the obvious advantage of darkness. But meantime, they were making sure that their victims had no safe line of escape.

"They may relax a little near sundown," Sam decided. "Then if I can reach the digger while you cover me with the rifle, we may have a chance. I'll back it up to the mound, and you'll have to make a concerted run for it. If you get inside, it may protect us long enough to get through the mob and outrun them." Back inside the little dome, the men listened grimly as Gregg outlined the situation and plan to them. Lee and Barney nodded as he finished.

Dickson shook his head. "Not all of us. Dr. Gregg, that robot isn't safe with us. He deliberately refused to obey. He got us into this!"

"Sit down, Dr. Frankenstein," Lee said sharply. A big hand put force behind his order. "We're all in this together—even you! With what I heard about the danger to us of the Rock Devil and the trolls' insistence we kill it, I thought Pete was doing the right thing. And I still don't blame him. What got into the trolls, anyhow, Jim?"

Gregg shrugged. "Who knows? We can guess. But Sam and I were always uncertain about the legends and the parts we couldn't seem to get. We knew they were afraid of his reviving—but now it seems the only reason they didn't attack us before was because of that fear. They liked his trinkets, but when he wanted to change their ways, they killed and buried him. That's all we know."

"No, Jim," Sam corrected him. "They didn't bury him. That hole in the floor isn't troll work. There had to be at least two aliens. One found the first and buried him, then took such vengeance on the trolls that they still remember. They must have thought it was the same one. So they are afraid he'll revive again."

"You mean that robot's master was with him?" Dickson asked.

Gregg shook his head. "There were no alien 'masters.' From the books I studied, the masters died off so long ago that the robot branch no longer has clear records of it. Something happened—perhaps some disease—and the robots carried on alone."

"Disease? Murder!" Dickson came to his feet with a scream, his face taut and white with all the ancient Earth fears he had bottled up under his mask of scientific study. "The robots killed their masters. Just as ours will do. We're not safe while a single robot exists. They're the most dangerous threat to our lives—and you sit there!"

Lee was moving toward him, but Gregg's fist stopped the tirade. "Pete, don't listen—"

But Gregg's words were too late. Pete swung abruptly, grabbing Sam's spare batteries from the desk, and he was pounding up the tunnel. By the time Sam could get past the tangle of men around Dickson, the other robot had vanished.

"He'll kill himself," Gregg shouted. "He has to. If he's the greatest source of harm to men, that damned first law has to negate the third. We've got to stop him."

Sam shook his head, but he followed the others up the tunnel to the entrance. Even Dickson managed to stagger along with the others, moaning and grimacing with the pain of his jaw as sanity returned to him.

At first, there was no sign of Pete. Then they saw that the trolls had begun to stream forth and cluster below the ledge, their vulpine stares fixed upwards. Sam followed their gaze and finally spotted the other robot. Pete had almost reached the top of the mound, scrambling and fighting for holds in the crumbling surface. As they looked, he reached the peak and sat down upon it.

Methodically, he began to open his chest plate and change from his fresh batteries to the used spares he had scooped from the desk. Below, the trolls began screaming. "*Yar! Yar Noo!*"

"*Yar Noo haremet!*" Pete shouted back in old Trollish. "The Rock Devil has returned! You did evil as you did of old, and the Rock Devil came from the dust and entered into this body and became strong again. Fear me and run from me, little bugs of evil!"

Most of them had already begun to draw back, though a few were lifting their bows. Now Pete stood up again, the two fresh batteries in his hands.

And Sam could see that the protective caps were removed, exposing the bare terminals.

"Down!" he cried sharply to the men.

Pete jumped, holding the batteries, moving them precisely and slowly toward his own metal body. And just before he landed among the screaming trolls, he moved his hands to short the terminals against himself.

Those batteries were capable of holding a hundred ampere hours at more than a hundred volts pressure as a strain in the space within them. And now suddenly twenty kilowatt hours of potential energy screamed out in a terrible attempt to become raw heat.

When the explosion of light and heat was over, there were no trolls except the dead and the fleeing.

Pete's torment was over. The laws and idiocy that had made his life a hell where all he did was wrong had been repealed.

* * *

"We can go home now," Sam told the men as they emerged from the tunnel. "I guess we can even go out to the stars on the great Gregg Expedition to find the aliens. But first, Barney, will you help me take what's left of Pete and bury him in the hole like the other Rock Devil?"

And with the mangled body would go a card that Sam had carried for all the years since he had graduated—a cheap little printed card of congratulations with the scrawl of a janitor on the back. It was the code a man had inscribed for Sam:

Take care of yourself—and always try to leave things a little better for the next fellow.

Pete hadn't been given such a code, of course. But he'd earned the right to it, nonetheless.

Though Poppies Grow

Vaguely he was aware that he should have been some heroic figure, stalking along with his head up and the fire of high devotion in his eyes. His shoes should have gleamed brightly, his chin should have been firm and square, and there should have been a glint of devil-may-care recklessness in his expression, an appealing quirk to the smile he should be wearing. For a few seconds, he tried to simulate the dashing, heroic figure in his mind, but the best he could do was a wry grimace at his own thoughts.

Service shoes, mud-spattered, scratched, and with a hole picked out of one toe, were blunt and heavy on his feet—there'd been no time for polish. The wraparound leggings were correctly done, but somehow they were lacking in any trim smartness. And the dirty suit of khaki was hardly the raiment of a hero, especially when topped by a trench cap roughly mended. A cord around the tight collar supported a grim gas mask, and a lumpy rucksack was on his back, but the holster on his hip was empty; his hands felt lost without a rifle and bayonet in them.

"Lost" was the right word; his whole feeling was one of being lost, of wandering in a dirty fog, slushing through muck and mire, aimlessly, dimly conscious of some high mission, not quite believable. And with that in his mind, it was too much to ask his body to assume heroism. Instead, he trudged along quietly, neither trim nor quite careless, his eyes turning slowly from side to side, but somehow without much curiosity.

He stopped then, to fish for a cigarette, and realized his last butt was already gone. "Wish I had a cigarette, at least," popped into his mind, something someone had said once, while lying down in a muddy hole watching the blood trickle out slowly. For a moment, the scene was crystal clear, then it faded back and was gone, and he turned on with a shrug; he'd been without smokes before, would be again. A thin, average-height youth, with something almost haunted in his eyes, lips tensed a trifle, lost without name or place or knowledge of why he was there.

But there was nothing to do but go on, and the hazy idea that he had to go on was fixed in his mind. Back there in that place, he'd felt it—had been feeling it grow until he could no longer resist, and had risen and come out into a strange world where no guns boomed ominously to suggest a coming drive, and where a clean, well-paved road led down through the early mist to this bridge that ran over a river, somewhere.

It was a clean, white bridge, and beyond it was the suggestion of some building, looming up quietly ahead. There was neither mud nor dust, no shell holes, no barbed wire, no men screaming out their last breaths, just beyond the reach of their comrades—like Tommy. The picture of Tommy out there on the wire, pleading to them to shoot him and get it over with, was the one sharply etched memory that was left. Tommy'd been there for hours, screaming between the roars of the guns and whine of the shells, begging them to finish it off for him and they'd huddled back behind the bags, risking death at intervals in an attempt to center a rifle on him and grant his wish—uselessly; Death hadn't been ready for Tommy yet.

And then it had been too much. Someone with them had laughed, gripping his head, and dropped his rifle to go out there, over the sandbags, and through the debris of shell holes and mud, running, not bravely but hysterically and crazily to where Tommy was caught and dying too slowly. Twice fragments had hit him, and he'd staggered back to jump forward again. Tommy'd seen the running figure and somehow Tommy'd straightened up a little in the snarl and managed to shake his head, yelling now for the runner to go back, swearing with oaths learned only at the right hand of Death. Somehow, the runner had made it, and groped down with pliers for the wire holding Tommy helpless there, just as a shell burst somewhere with a jar. Then Tommy'd slumped back, silent.

Beyond that, the picture vanished, and the man on the bridge shook his head. He couldn't remember who'd been the crazy fool to run out then, nor what had happened to him; he'd probably been blown into small pieces—if he was lucky. Shells could do funny things. For all he knew, Tommy's would-be rescuer might have been himself. Why not? That had been a long time ago, from the time-sense that had gone on measuring out the passing days and years and was still a part of him, but between the incident and the moment when he'd stirred restlessly and climbed out into the morning mist, he had no pictures, no feeling even that there should be pictures. It fitted his mood that he should be dead. There were no angels around, but his religion had been the rather hazy feeling of a God somewhere who let a man go on after he shuffled off his flesh. Angels would have been nice, but not necessary to the thing. Somewhere in school, he'd been taught of Asgard and the Norse Valhalla, where the warriors came up over the bridge Bifrost to enter Odin's halls and fight and eat and die and fight again.

Again he grimaced. Bunk! Under his feet was good cement, and the asphalt on the road wasn't exactly heavenly. Neither were the graceful autos that passed in increasing numbers, low and rounded in lines, and mercifully silent. This was some part of the same crazy world, though he didn't know where, nor how he'd gotten there, nor what he'd been doing in all the time he could feel had passed. He didn't much care.

Ahead of him, another figure appeared, clad in khaki, also, but a khaki that had more green and less yellow in it. In mild curiosity he examined the trim uniform, wondering when they'd issued clothes like that—they looked like a cross between service uniform and civvies. Long pants, no leggings, a well-draped coat and, of all things, an open lapel and soft-collared shirt. Habit led his eyes to the gold bars on the shoulders, and his arm came up in a gesture that was almost pure conditioned reflex, yet still not quite snappy.

The lieutenant returned it smoothly, started on past, and then slowed to stare in a puzzled frown, glancing from the uniform to the boyish face, and back. "Where'd you get it?"

"France, sir. Where else? The ones we got here fitted."

"France? Mister, you're a da—" The lieutenant's eyes caught the boy's then, and he dropped his own, fumbling for a cigarette. "Sorry. You looked so—Anyway, none of my business. Smoke?"

"Thanks, sir." He drew in on the cigarette with a grateful relief from the gnawing little tension that had been in his muscles, saluted again, and went on toward the white building that loomed up closer now, and clearer as the sultry heat of the day began dispersing the fog. At least he knew for sure that this wasn't France—it could only be America. When you've been away long enough, you get to know the walk of a man on foreign land, and the lieutenant, hadn't had it. Funny, he'd never expected to get back here, and now he couldn't tell how he'd done it.

Then the bridge came to an end, and he was facing a circular roadway around the building; he knew where he was for sure, now. Few buildings carry the individuality of the Lincoln Memorial, and there could be no mistaking it. Beyond it, in confirmation, was the spire of the Washington Monument, and between them, as he circled, he caught sight of the Reflecting Pool. He'd seen dozens of picture postcards, and there'd been the guide books an aunt had brought back from her trip to Washington, showing an artist's rendering of what it would all look like when finished. Well, he'd meant to see it sometime for himself, and now he was looking at it, wondering only faintly how he'd come to the capital.

He completed the half circle, and stood looking out over the Pool toward the Monument and on to where the dome of the Capitol showed in the now clear air over the trees on the Monument grounds, then swung back to face the statue of Lincoln, sitting calmly gazing over it all, enshrined like the old Greek gods in their temples. There was no thrill, no lift of spirits in the boy's mind, but he stood there for long moments, feeling the calm peace and sure purpose of the masterpiece. And as he looked, the feeling of purpose and some call to duty began to flow through his mind again. There was a reason for his presence here, and it was up to him to find it. Feeling half silly, he brought his arm up in a smarter salute to the statue than the lieutenant had received, turned and headed toward the city proper.

He was walking slightly more slowly, the stride of someone used to exhaustion and no longer capable of feeling fatigued or rested, as he came to the red light. This, he saw, was Fourteenth Street, and he'd been following New York Avenue for the last block; Pennsylvania Avenue, which had carried him past the White House, had vanished somewhere, and he had no desire to trace its windings. As he stood there, the light changed, and he started across, sticking to the general direction he'd been following for the last half hour. Already the streets were filling with people, and he could feel their occasional stares, but by now he'd learned the trick of turning to meet their eyes. Invariably, they dropped their gaze and went on, without looking back.

The girls had bothered him most, at first. He remembered faintly the girls who'd said good-bye to them back home, and was aware more strongly of the time and changes since then. He'd blushed like a fool when he saw the first young woman walking along, her short skirt showing her legs, her sheer blouse concealing all too little of the lace and silken things she wore beneath. But there'd been a freshness and cleanness about her that left no doubts in his head. Now he was becoming used to the cosmetics, the red fingernails, the revealing feminine clothes, and the free, confident carriage. There was an ache inside him somewhere that the French hussies who'd come out to the doughboys had never brought there, a queer tingling pride in this country that could produce such girls. He caught himself reaching out with slightly trembling fingers to touch the arm of one of them, jerked it back, and blushed again, hot with the feeling of his own foolishness. A man who'd get fresh with these deserved shooting or worse.

Sloppy sentimentality, he told himself. What he needed was breakfast. Wonder if he could wangle a little white bread toast and coffee with sugar? There'd been letters about that in the trenches, and of how fifteen pounds of substitutes had to be bought for one pound of good white flour. He shrugged and turned into a restaurant at Twelfth Street after jingling his pocket hastily to make sure he had the money. The counter was filled, and he ran his eyes over the booths, wondering whether to wait or take up one of them by himself.

It was then he saw the girl sitting alone, reading a newspaper, and the queer ache came over him again. She wasn't exactly beautiful, but somehow lovely, her brown hair falling softly to the shoulders, her face a trifle gaminish, with a dash of Irish around the mouth, and a smoothness of line that made what might have been thinness seem utterly feminine. You can't describe a girl like that, he thought, knowing it was sloppy and not caring; you just look at her and feel it.

She seemed to sense his gaze, for her eyes met his. That did it. How an impish provocativeness could be blended with naive innocence and a trace of maternalism, he couldn't have told, but her eyes held all that, even as they registered faint distrust. He started forward, crimson again, but impelled by the craving for feminine words that he'd been feeling for the last hour.

"I...sorry if I'm rude—" Her eyes were still on his, and he stopped. He couldn't do it, even though she'd been the first one who hadn't jerked her glance away. He started to turn, just as she smiled, a half-amused, half-puckish lighting of her face. "Oh, darn it, miss, I don't want to be... but—"

"Why not sit down? I suppose I should, but I don't mind." She pushed the paper away from her and motioned to the seat opposite. He slid in awkwardly, and she smiled in honest amusement that was less embarrassing than any attempt to cover it would have been. "You act as if you'd never seen a girl before, soldier."

"It's not quite that bad, miss. But—well, over there, things were different. We didn't see the nice ones, and the others—" He dropped it and ordered his toast and coffee. "Seems funny, getting back to America. Over there in France, I thought I'd never make it."

"Over there in France? You were fighting the Nazis?" She'd finished her breakfast and was digging into her handbag. A cigarette came out and she lighted it casually while he stared. But no one else seemed to notice, and there were so many strange things that he decided to forget it.

"What Nazis? All I know is that we were supposed to be fighting the Kaiser, but after we got there, all I ever saw were a bunch of boys on the other side in different helmets. We were too busy fighting to be fighting anyone in particular, even when we called them Heinies."

Her eyes were wide now, and she shook her head, suspicion written large on her face. "Kaiser? Heinies? But that was twenty-five years ago;

and you're no older than I am. My father was over there with them; he married Mom after he came back."

The boy made no comment. Twenty-five years! Her paper was still lying open, and he glanced at it, to see her words confirmed. "July 3, 1942." And his world was built around 1918. The girl's father had returned from the World War to marry her mother!

They'd pulled *him* out of college in '17, put him in a camp for hasty instructions, run him across on a troopship, and then there'd been the long months of death and mud. There'd been the starving French girls and Tommy and—Then other men had come back, married, brought up children and put them through college, while he felt that nothing had happened to him. Even the mud spots on his clothes seemed the same old familiar ones, and the stubble on his face was still a yellow down, hardly needing a razor. He was nibbling at the toast and tasting the coffee as he thought it over in his head, but he pushed them back. He had no need of them—there was something wrong with the idea of eating now, and only old habit had driven him to try it.

She was speaking again. "Yet, I guess I believe you—I don't know why. The way your eyes look—Dad always had the same thing in his when he talked about that war. And your uniform doesn't look like a parade getup. There's something about you—as if I knew you, or something. How—"

"I don't know," he answered slowly. "I don't know anything—my own name, even, how I got here, where I'm going, what I'm to do. I can remember the whine of shells one minute, then something made me get up this morning and come out, looking for something I've got to do. I don't even know what a returned doughboy can do in peacetime."

"It isn't exactly peacetime." She looked at the clock, frowned, and turned back to him, holding out the paper. "I shouldn't believe you, but I do. And I'm supposed to be at work in ten minutes, yet I'm going to be late just to tell you what's been going on. I wonder why I'm not surprised, but I'm not."

It was much later when he sat back, nodding. Hitler, Mussolini, Japan—no longer an ally, but an enemy, ruthless and without principles. France, no longer a battleground for democracy, but in the hands of the invaders. And this time they weren't merely Heinies, but something grimmer and uglier, Nazis who devoted themselves to the blood altar of a barbarian racial fanaticism.

"'To make the world safe for democracy,'" he quoted softly. Funny, he'd really believed that, in spite of himself. He'd laughed at it among his cynical college friends, and yet all of them must have been swept up by it, with the old crusading spirit. It had been a bright vision, even in the mud of France, a hope for the world; and a few power-mad idiots had taken only twenty-five years to trample it down into the ground and begin all over again.

"Bitter?" she asked.

He shook his head. "No, somehow I'm not. We were right, then, I think. If there'd been no need to make the world safe for democracy, then all this would never have happened afterward. We just figured we could do it all in one swoop, and it seems to take more doing than that. I should have known; I was majoring in history before it began. No other major conflict was ever finished in five years, or fifty years. You have to keep fighting for your side until someday there isn't any other side, because you've conquered it a little at a time and the grandchildren of the men you fought believe the same as you do. Then there'll be something else to fight about. But the important thing is that little by little things do get ahead that way. We had to fight the Revolutionary War to start democracy, the Civil War to keep it, the World War to save the others who felt as we did and tried to extend it, and this war the same. It's like gold mining, you might say."

"I don't get it."

He didn't entirely himself. Principles were vague things to die for, and yet sometimes they were worth dying and killing for. Usually the direct action was easier than trying to understand clearly why you had to do it. "Well, the prospectors found themselves mines by working harder hunting for it and keeping at it, believing that there was gold there if they'd work for it. They dug it out and began thinking about bringing out their families, and then somebody jumped their claims with a gun in his hand. They had to fight him for it, and probably fight his kind more than once, fight out false claims in court, and maybe at last come through with it, bring out their families and help build up one of our modern cities where others could live and work safely. If anything's worth having—mine, family, flag, country, or democracy—it's worth fighting for, and you'll have to fight for it."

"I never thought of it that way. But you've already fought once—and it didn't seem to do much good, did it?"

He grinned slowly, realizing that her question was not meant as an argument against his, but only a probe for his reaction. "It gave me the chance to fight again—maybe this way we can beat them someday and keep the gold; the other way, we never could. And this time, I'm going to enlist—that's probably what I felt I had to do all the time."

"And I'm going to be bawled out for being two hours late, but I don't care…No, I'll pay my own check." She reached for it, but he had it in his hand already, and was groping in his pocket for the change that had rattled there.

It came out—seven francs and four centimes. There was nothing else, though he groped back again in frantic hope. There were only the eleven pieces, dated from 1904 to 1915, and all coins of France—a France that no longer had any real existence except in the mind of its still rebellious people. He stood there helplessly staring at them, his face reddening slowly, and puzzlement vying with the embarrassment. Even the coins he carried were the same coins that had been in his pocket in France the day that…that…

He almost had it when she pulled him back to the seat. "Easy, soldier. It's all right. I understand—or I seem to understand, at least. Here." She had her handbag open and was pushing a bill into his hand. He saw that it was about half the size of the bills he'd remembered, and that Lincoln's picture was still on the five-dollar note. And the memory that had almost come to him was gone again.

"But—"

"Shh. You can pay it back someday. Here, I'll take these as security." She was smiling at him, and the maternal part of her eyes was uppermost then as she picked the French coins out of his hand and stuck them into her pocketbook. "And here's my name and address, so you can return it. A soldier needs some money to carry him until payday, you know. Besides, I don't have anyone in the service writing me, and this will give me a good excuse to ask you. You will keep it?"

For an instant, he was afraid he was going to cry in front of her, but he managed to control most of it. "What else can I do, when you make it sound so natural? I—oh, you know what I feel about it."

She smiled and nodded again. "I'm glad. Write often, and good luck!" Then he was paying the checks and buying cigarettes, while she went down the street away from him, her short skirt no longer something strange to him, but a part of the spirit of her. He asked the cashier for directions, and she gave them with eyes carefully away from his. Now to enlist and quiet the strengthened urge to do his part again.

Out on the street, it seemed hard to realize that this was the capital of a nation—his nation—at war. Particularly when he remembered that tomorrow was the Fourth of July, most patriotic of all the national holidays. Oh, there were children with their cap pistols already, and the posters everywhere advertising Defense Bonds, silence to keep secrets from the enemy, and similar things, but there was none of the blatant hysteria of the last war, as he remembered it. And yet, in the quietness with which everyone went about his business, he sensed a determination that was more solidly based than it had been in '17.

The newspapers, he saw, were filled with news, some good and some bad, from what he could tell, and there was bickering in Congress, and accusations of war profiteering, of "too little, too late," and other current cries. But those things had happened before, and this time there was more control than there had been. It was impossible for any large nation to agree on all details, useless to hope that some shortsighted people would not try to turn the general trouble into a lever to use for their own selfish purpose. Those things were a part of war, as much as the fighting. But this was a healthy spirit around him, a calmer, more determined spirit. Before, in America there had been the cries and the shoutings, the loud oratory, and disordered scrambling that had been in severe contrast to the actual frontline spirit. This was no longer a people trying to convince themselves that they should fight for a principle, but a people who knew they had to, just as the soldiers at the front must know. He pushed on toward the recruiting office, more at ease than he'd been since he'd come out of the place in the morning. This would be a better war to fight in.

There were a few men already there, sitting in chairs and waiting their turn. They were ordinary enough young men, mostly, though one oldster was vehemently protesting his ability, and there was a small amount of good-natured kidding going on. The man on his right turned to say something, caught his glance, and settled back quietly. Something about him was different; their looks weren't ones of fear, but of minding their own business, something like the expression of a soldier who'd started to address another familiarly, and then caught the insignia of a major just in time to check it.

They came to him in time, with the inevitable papers that were different but strongly familiar. At least, there was less of the hurried, impersonal treatment here than there had been in the draft center the last time; probably some of the prejudice in favor of enlistment still lasted, though he'd learned that the matter was no test as to a man's courage at the front. He filled in as he came to the questions, pulling his answers out of the air, conscious that a lot of them were probably the correct ones, but sure of none. He stated his age minus the lapse of twenty-five years, and no questions were raised, nor was the matter of his outmoded uniform brought up. Once a new man came into the office and stared for a second before turning on, but he seemed under a blanket protection. Wearing even a last-war uniform should have been a matter for suspicion in an enlistee, but there seemed to be none.

"You forgot to put down your name," he was told. Name? He had none. But his eye fell on the belt of a uniform at the other end of the room and he wrote down "Sam Brown" quietly. "Middle name?"

"None."

"Okay, might as well get your medical over with. In there."

He went in, behind two others who were discussing their surprise at the prompt medicals; they'd expected to have to wait for notice, as in the case of draftees. He was free from expectation or curiosity, his mind almost empty as he waited his turn.

Finally one of the doctors indicated him. "Sam Brown next. Dr. Feldman, take this one."

Feldman took him in tow, into a place where another man was dressing, "Strip." And still there was no comment on his uniform, though he was surprised himself to see the gashed underclothes, stained and muddy. A bath and fresh clothes would have come in handy.

"Step up here; stand straight. Good. Weight, one hundred forty-three; height, five feet nine and one-half inches. A little thin, but not too bad. Bend over." It went on through the old routine, and finally the strap was wrapped around his arm for blood pressure, pumped up, and Dr. Feldman looked at the gauge, which held no meaning for him. "Systolic… umm. Wait a minute."

The medico brought out a stethoscope, listened carefully, moved it, and listened again. "Just a minute. Dr. Palz, will you come here?" And again it was repeated, this time by Palz. Feldman looked on carefully. "Well?"

Palz nodded. "If you mean—then I do get the same results. Hmm. All right, young man, if you'll jump from one leg to another twenty times… Good." And it was all begun for the third time, now with muttered consultations going on between the two doctors. "We're probably both crazy, Dr. Feldman, but—"

"Yeah." Feldman rubbed his hands against his side. "Yeah. When in doubt—I'm sorry, Mr. Brown, but I'm afraid you won't do. You can dress now."

The boy looked slowly from one to the other, and he drew nothing from their incredulous expressions. He'd been sure there would be no trouble that way—he'd passed the draft physicals with an A-1 rating, and while the fighting at the front had been tough, surely it hadn't softened him—unless there had been something in the years between that he couldn't remember.

"Soldier's heart?" he ventured, remembering talk of men whose hearts raced, weakened, and failed at the first real sign of exercise. "You mean my heart's too fast?"

"Hardly too fast—no." Feldman looked at him thoughtfully and almost fearfully. "If I had time of my own, I'd—You can leave by that door."

That was no answer. "Doctor, what's the reason then? Oh, I gather it's my heart, but what's wrong with it?"

Again Feldman studied him before answering. "Don't you know?"

"No. I wouldn't ask if I did."

"Then feel your own pulse, man. That's all."

He stumbled out, wondering, into one of the little parks that seemed to be all over the capital, drawing slowly at a cigarette. He wasn't sure he wanted to try it—anything that had such a reaction on men who were familiar with all kinds of disorders must be pretty bad. But as he finished the cigarette, he mashed it out under his heel and put his finger to his pulse.

There was none!

Nor was there a sign of heartbeat when he held his hand there; the artery under his neck gave the same answer. Five times he tried it. No heartbeat. Even when he jumped from the bench and ran wildly through the park and down the street to another, he could detect no faintest sign of a pulse anywhere. Yet he was panting, and he had the feeling of hot blood coursing through him and sweat pouring off. He pressed his hand under his armpit and drew it away—dry! His skin showed no slightest sign of moisture anywhere, though the day was as hot and sticky as any he'd known—typical Washington summer weather, he'd gathered from various uncomplimentary remarks. Curiously, there was no excitement in him. His brain should have been turning frantically from point to point for some rational explanation, but he sought none. Instead, he got up from the bench and went up Eleventh Street with a slow, even stride, across E Street, through the crowds at F, and beyond G toward H, his only thought being the counting off of the blocks as they came. Then a little novelty shop caught his eye, and he went in.

"Do you have a small mirror—anything at all, just something cheap?"

The woman nodded and handed across a small square of glass. "Ten cents," she said, and dropped her eyes hastily to the coin as he looked at her.

He stuck it in his pocket and went out onto Eleventh again, carefully aware that the heat and walking were making him breathe heavily; he was conscious of the fairly rapid rise and fall of his chest, of the slightly choking feeling that comes from too much humidity in the air. He held the mirror up to his mouth, drew it back, and inspected it before tossing it away.

Its work was done. There was no condensed moisture on it from his breath. He'd expected it, and again there was the curious lack of emotional response. Quite calmly he faced the fact that by two standard tests he was dead. But it was a senseless paradox of death that seemed to breathe but didn't—the cigarette smoke eddied slowly from his mouth as he watched, but the mirror showed no sign of moisture. To hell with it; at worst, it was a highly vital death.

No wonder they'd turned him down, though; the miracle was that they hadn't gone crazy, though he supposed it would take a lot to do that to a doctor—or would it? Weren't they used to certain absolute facts, such as that a living man automatically included a beating heart, and when confronted with a violation of their fundamental law, wouldn't it hit them harder? He didn't know.

And perversely, the feeling that he had been called forth for some job that needed doing was stronger than ever. And the people about him were suddenly strangers, walking in a strange world. That feeling passed, and he felt normal again, except for the urge to do something and the knowledge that he was unable seemingly to find it.

One of the boxes in the shops along the street which were giving out music and speeches—"radios," apparently, since the shop was advertising the things under that name—broke off its news report of some action taking place in the Pacific and began one of the announcements he heard several times already. "Men, Uncle Sam needs your help. If you're a skilled worker..." There was more of it, but he stopped listening, turning it over in his mind.

His skill was limited. Before the war, he'd been an unlicked cub of a kid, filled with a kid's idle dreams and hazy desires to do something, but unsure of what. He hadn't even peddled papers; and they'd packed him off to college to a thoroughly impractical education at sixteen. He remembered vague discussions of the typical pseudo-politics with other boys there, something about the United States being able to stay out of all foreign affairs; he'd been for it, as he remembered. Tommy hadn't—that's where he'd met Tommy, and they'd met again over there. Tommy'd enlisted, but he'd been too full of the school twaddle to free his mind from it at first, and he'd been drafted before he could reorient himself. An incomplete major in history, a vague feeling that he'd sometime write a book on the *Dynamics of History*, and school politics hardly constituted skills.

His thoughts had been too much in his head for him to notice where he was going or the people around him, but now a vague awareness of something unusual made him look forward quickly. One of the crowd ahead was staring at him with a sickly, whitish-green cast to his skin that made him stand out like a ghost at a wedding. As the boy watched, the man's knees were trembling visibly, and he stood, half turned, apparently rooted to the spot.

Still the soldier's feet moved forward toward the man directly in his path, and sudden fright seemed to galvanize the frozen expression into a grimace of the purest possible fear.

"*Gott, nein! Gott bewahre, so mach' ich nie wieder! Hinweg, um Gottes Willen!* No, back-back! I repent, I surrender, but back! *O, du lieber Gott, schuldig kenn' ich mich*—" German and English spilled out in a quavering admission of treachery and deceit, both carrying an accent, as if the groveling creature had grown up in both and learned neither perfectly.

The bulging eyes were centered squarely on the boy now, and he began to realize that whatever frightened the man was something about himself, but his feet carried him remorselessly forward without direction from his mind. Fear seemed suddenly to pass its ultimate pinnacle, and a convulsive flash of movement brought the man to his feet and sent him off in a wild bound, unmindful that it carried him directly into the arms of an approaching policeman. For a moment the officer stepped backward and then, as the meaning of the babbled words hit him, he pinned the other firmly and looked over the crowd that had collected. "Anyone see what got into this damned spy here?" The boy started backward, but none were looking at him accusingly, as he'd expected, save for the frozen eyes of the self-confessed German agent, and they shook their heads, denying any knowledge of the reasons behind the peculiar actions of the captive. The officer shrugged and turned toward the call box on the corner.

"Darned funny. He acts as if he'd seen Old Nick himself. All right, break it up, we'll take care of this guy!"

The boy looked around again at this dispersing crowd, but no eyes were on him, and their curiosity was uncentered. Whatever the German had seen was unrevealed to the rest of them. He went up the street, and there was no more attention paid to him than before. Why?

The question went without answer. Ordinarily, he might have put it down to coincidence and dropped it from his mind, but too many strange things had been forced upon him at once, and it seemed that there must be some connection. The German had looked at him and seen—what? Whatever it was, it obviously had been neither pretty nor normal, unless there was some incident between them in the buried years of which he had no memory. And such stark fear seemed hardly capable of being inspired by anything even as nearly human as he seemed to be.

Having no answer to the riddle, he dropped it as he struck New York Avenue and turned toward Twelfth, that being the only place in the city with any associations in his mind. He hardly expected to find—uh—Anne there, and he was right in that. But he went in out of the heat and sat down in a booth. "Beer."

It came out, cold and amber clear, and his eyes lighted faintly. Whether there was blood in his veins or a heart to pump it, at least the beer slid down smoothly and its taste was unchanged. He had no hunger, no faintest desire for food, which was another abnormality, and the familiarity of the unchanged taste of the liquid was like the presence of an old friend. Three more pennies went for a copy of a newspaper, picked at random, and he glanced over the headlines, mostly without meaning. Some of the stories helped a little to clarify his hazy notion of the world of 1942, though. He was more interested in the comparatively few appeals to the patriotism of the readers; he chuckled wryly at the idea of giving his blood to the Red Cross. But the general idea was far from humorous; if his interpretation of the plasma bank was correct, it would have been a godsend twenty-five years before. He'd seen them lying on the stretchers, white and deathly still, with spilled blood on all sides of them and none available to save them. Now, it seemed, blood from civilians could keep the life going in men three thousand miles or more away. And he couldn't help, even in that.

Somehow, he wanted desperately to help. And his inability only made the need to do so the greater in his mind. They weren't blazoning frantic appeals from the rooftops this time, but the few small advertisements he saw reached out as the wildly painted signs had never done. Then, he'd been a boy, untempered and uncertain about such abstractions as the good of patriotism. The dragging months in France had cured it, had hardened him into a man, and burned a sense of responsibility into him. It seemed that a man picked up an obligation to a country that gave him the right to fight and—well, why not finish the thought?—and die for it.

But would beer sit well in a dead man's stomach? It didn't matter. He turned back through the paper idly, glancing over the sports items, which meant nothing to him, noticing that movie advertisements were still in superlatives, though there was casual mention of "talkies," which must mean the experiments with sight and sound had been perfected, and skipping the local stuff. The cartoon on the editorial page meant no more to him than the sports cartoon, and he swept over the puerile-sounding editorial, then to the column beside it; there his eyes stuck.

The arguments were old; variants of them had been used by a few papers in the last war. Nothing treasonable, of course; the old line of "we agree with you—only we're more patriotic—but…Can we trust our allies? Stab Russia when you can before she gets out of hand! Keep the armies at home to defend our own shores, instead of out there fighting for England, who wouldn't do anything for us. The Japs have already got India where they want her, so let's retreat and hold Hawaii!" All the appeals to the festering little fears and hatreds of a great mass of the people were there, to stir up the readers, increase their prejudices, make them doubt, and hinder any forthright offensive. He'd been swayed by those same arguments once, and because of that, and because he'd seen their falsity as he mingled with the men of other nations and saw the grim facts at the front, his swearing was none too gentle as he read it. Better the German agent than the man—managing editor, he saw by the masthead—who'd write such rot in the guise of patriotism while better men were dying for it, without time to talk of the love of right or country. Damned slimy skunk!

Why, or what he hoped to accomplish, he couldn't have told, but anger swelled up in him as he paid his check and moved out into the street and toward the nearby address he'd noted carefully. He was a little ashamed of his anger, and then ashamed of his shame; anger on that subject was justifiable, and if it did no good, it could at least do no harm.

He found the editorial rooms without trouble, and the girl who stood guard outside only looked up once, then went on about her work, raising no objections as he pushed through the door and into the inner office; such minor miracles no longer caught more than a passing notice from him.

The editor threw a quick glance up and back to the work he was doing. "Well? How'd you get in here, and what do you want?"

Anger was still hot in him as he held out the column. "I'd like to make a complete fool of myself by pushing your face in. I should do it, because I don't have the average man's reasons for not doing it, and it's a strong temptation. Man, do you realize what ideas you're trying to put into your readers' minds? Doesn't the responsibility of your job mean anything to you?"

"It means a great deal, young man." The answer seemed sincere enough, surprisingly, though it was hard to tell while the other kept his eyes down. "It means enough that if you and a dozen others who've threatened me were to come up here regularly to push my face in, as you put it, I'd still do all I could to keep us from going down the little end of the horn before the ultimate threat of communism. We did it before, and—"

"Bunk! If you mean to tell me you believe in this unmitigated, treasonous rot—" For a breathing space he paused, and then the words inside him poured out. He couldn't have told afterward just what he'd said, though it had seemed important at the time; partly, he knew, it was an appeal to logic, mostly to emotions, but the words came to his lips almost automatically, while the editor sat quietly, face relaxed after the first flush of anger, slowly raising his eyes. Finally the words were drained from him completely, and still the other made no answer. What was the use? He turned back with half a shrug, out of the office and down to the street.

But he was feeling more cheerful, somehow. The release of his emotions had been better for him than keeping them to himself, at least, and he was no worse off. With new determination, he set off toward an agency on E Street; the small notice he'd seen had indicated they might be able to help him in locating the work he must do. His heart—or whatever served him—was lighter as he headed down Ninth, whistling faintly.

Night found him again in front of the restaurant on Twelfth Street. He stood there, much as he had been on the bridge in the morning, though the gas mask was in some trash can and the rucksack had followed it—the little it held was useless to him. But where he had merely felt empty and lost on the bridge, his feeling now was one of having been emptied—not only emptiness, but the emptiness which follows fullness.

The cigarette dangled from his lips and finally dropped out. He watched the door, seeing the people come in and go out, and could feel himself apart from them—a useless, wasted part of the world. The afternoon had taught him the last meaning of futility. At the agency, they'd been as helpful as they could, but there was nothing for him; he had no skill beyond soldiering, and that one skill "lodged in him useless, though his soul more bent to serve therewith—" Milton, he remembered; but Milton had his work still to do when he wrote that sonnet.

And afterward, tramping the streets, looking everywhere in the faint hope that he could at least replace someone who would be of more use, he'd found a man out of his true time has no place. But there was no room for bitterness, or even for more than the merest stirring of thought.

He stood there, watching, and it was later still when he realized that he'd been hoping to catch a glimpse of Anne.

Once he started inside, but he had no need of food, and the beer that would have been welcome could only come out of money which he no longer had a right to use.

Finally he turned slowly, with a last look down the street, and began moving down New York Avenue toward no destination in particular. Behind him was the sound of men's feet, the brusque stamping of workmen on their way to their homes, and the clicking of high, feminine heels. He heard them all objectively, as if he could no longer connect them with people, or the people with himself, but only noises coming through a thick gray mist.

For seconds, one set of foot sounds had been near him, and now it was beside him. He slowed, without looking around, to let the owner of the feet go on, but the sounds slowed also, and he finally turned.

She was smiling, and the first warmth of the evening came into his spirits. "About time, soldier," she greeted him. "I had a hunch you might return there, but you were already going away when I spotted you. Were you look—"

"Looking for you? Yes. Though I had no right to be."

"Shh, soldier. If I could look for you, hadn't you the right to do the same for me?" Her arm went through his possessively, and in spite of himself, unnamed and painfully wonderful things passed through him; she was scarcely shorter than he in her high heels, yet she had the art of making him feel tall and strong and protective—even when it was she who did the protecting. "Did the day go so badly with you?"

He disregarded the last question, choosing to answer the first. "You were looking for me out of pity—you knew what would happen. And I…well, I was looking for you to get that pity, I suppose. No man has the right to go hunting for that."

"You weren't; I know that. You'd never turn to a woman for pity, soldier, but only because there are times when a man needs to talk to a girl. But I asked how the day went—and you haven't answered."

He told her of the recruiting station—though not the reason for the rejection—his flare-up at the newspaper, and the agency; the other places he mentioned without bothering to list. And her eyes were troubled as she listened, but there was neither scorn nor pity in them, and when he had finished, she made no immediate comment. For that he was grateful. Sometimes a man needs a woman's silent presence more than any words she can give him. They'd swung off New York Avenue and up one of the numbered streets while he talked, and now she turned him, again, into a lettered street, down a block, and finally stopped.

"Home." The house was one of the innumerable brownstone buildings scattered over the city, but better kept than most. She indicated a great curved window on the first floor. "I've got an apartment there. It isn't as fancy as living in an apartment hotel, but it's comfortable, and I can do as I please. Come on up with me and I'll have supper ready shortly."

With the best of intentions to refuse, he found himself following her up the few steps and into the place. There, at the door, he stopped, conscious of his dirty clothing, the heavy, worn shoes, and the appearance he presented in general. He had no business in the room he saw in front of him, with its graceful furnishings that managed to suggest comfort and hominess without any loss of fineness of line or richness of appointment. She smiled quizzically at his expression, throwing her bag and paper carelessly onto a chair.

"In with you, Mr. X. I'm not holding this door open another minute."

And again he was unable to disobey her as she pushed him down onto a sofa, pulled an apron off a rack, and went out into the little kitchenette to begin supper. He relaxed back on the seat after the first minute, and watched as she moved about, soaking in the grace and motions of her body as he might have basked in sunlight after sleeping in a cold cellar. Apparently the meal was almost entirely prepared already; she must have gone out after him deliberately either on a hunch or a wild chance. He wondered which.

"Hungry?" she asked as she piled the last dish on the table and indicated his chair.

He took it. "Not very. I—" Why go on pretending? She'd earned the truth, or at least a part of it. "I suspect I don't have any need to eat. I've managed to go all day without anything, and I'm still not hungry. Smells good, though."

"Then eat it," she ordered. "There's no fun in cooking unless someone else is around to enjoy it."

To his surprise, he found that there was still a savor to food, and while he felt no need of it, the sensation of eating was as enjoyable as ever. What would a ghost do with food? Or what should a living man do without the beat of his heart? Neither life nor death would serve as a single answer to the conflicting facts of his existence, just as there was no work for him among the living, nor rest among the dead.

Her voice broke in on his thoughts. "You don't need to breathe, either, do you, soldier? You forget to whenever you're thinking about something else."

There was no fear or surprise on her face as he looked up sharply. And as he glanced back at himself, he noticed his breath begin with a little jerk and then go on smoothly. He pushed the food aside and held out his wrist to her.

She touched it for a few seconds and nodded slowly; the whitening of her face was so slight that he sensed rather than saw it, but her voice was still perfectly calm. "I thought so. I noticed the breathing this morning, but didn't realize I'd done so until after I'd left you. Do you know 'In Flanders Field'? No, of course not."

Perhaps no war poem has ever come so close to perfection as that one, and she recited it well: "'We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset's glow; loved and were loved, and now we lie in Flanders Field…If ye break faith with us who die, we shall not sleep, though poppies grow in Flanders Field…'"

But the living had broken no faith here; over there, perhaps. Here they had taken up the quarrel with the foe—not the literal foe of men and arms, but the truer one of hatred and barbaric ideologies—and from what he had seen, none who might lie in Flanders Field could begrudge them their holding of the torch. He, it seemed, was guilty of breaking faith, but that not willingly.

He shrugged off the overlaid feeling of the poem on his own mood and stood up. "I can't bother you anymore, Anne. You know as much about me as I do, and you can see how hopeless I am. Here…I spent part of it, but here's what's left. I got it under false pretenses, and I'll probably never pay the rest back, but I have no need for this."

Her eyes were hurt, and then proud. "You need it more now, and I don't need it at all. Father has a home and money, if I want them; and my own work pays more than I can use. Call it a debt that my generation owes yours, and let me pay it. You'll need a room, unless you want to stay here. No, I meant that, soldier, but not as it sounds. There's a room here I never use, and I can trust you. Which will it be?"

"A room, I guess, if I can find one in this overcrowded city."

"There's one up the street somewhere; a friend of mine was telling me about it at work today. I've got the address in my other pocket-book, if you'll wait half a minute." She started back, then stopped at the door. "Darn, I took it out of the bag, now that I remember. No telling where I put it or how long you'll have to wait now. Why don't you look at the paper while I'm hunting. Something on page twelve may interest you, I think."

He picked it up and began to open it, but as she slipped back out of sight, he tossed it aside and did what he knew he must. The rug muffled his footsteps as he dropped the money on the table and passed to the door, which opened silently and closed without a creak. Outside and down the street, he heard her voice raised and a click of heels on the steps, but he was running then with every ounce of energy in his legs, around a corner, through an alley, and in zigzag fashion until she couldn't possibly trail him. The knowledge that she had tried to was oddly comforting, though.

It hadn't been pity, he knew, nor charity, nor any of the other blind and selfish emotions men use to inflate their own egos at the expense of others less fortunate. None of them would have made her accept and trust him or bear the knowledge of what sort of a creature he was without flinching and drawing away from him. That fact only made it the more necessary that he should leave.

He was a failure. How much of a failure, he could only guess as his feet carried him steadily onward through the streets, to Constitution Avenue and beyond. Lincoln Memorial was before him, but he avoided the statue, and was back on the bridge, again partially wrapped in a mist from the river that put halos around the lights. He was to have been a miracle and a symbol, somehow, and instead he was returning to the place from which he came, useless in a world where even the average ordinary failures could serve.

The bridge was more than a quarter of a mile in length, and his feet carried him along slowly, but it was behind him at last, and he was following a curving roadway that led up a hill. Just where he was going he did not know. That morning, beyond the driving need to come out, he had been aware of nothing. All he knew was that he had come from a place and was going back to it, carried by feet that drew him onward surely if slowly.

Yet he was reluctant to return. He halted to smoke and try to think, off the road a ways. In the sky, a premature skyrocket flashed up in zooming arc from somewhere in the city, and he ducked with an instinctive desire to hole up from anything that whined in the sky above him. Then he lay there, smoking and feeling; it could hardly be called thinking. And his emotions were a jumble of dark moods and bluely warm thoughts of the one part of the city that was other than an impersonal goal behind him.

It might have been minutes or hours later when he reached again for a smoke and drew out the last one in the package. But it was time to go on, and there was no sense in turning back. Above him, bright stars dappled the sky, and behind him the lights gleamed through the fog that snuggled against the ground and swirled about his feet. Before him, the road led somewhere.

It ended before his feet stopped and he looked about him to see the outlines of something that might have been a shrine or an amphitheater. Up there a soldier was pacing up and down in rigid military precision, and as he watched, another came forward and went through the high ritual of changing guards. Forward to the end of the stone platform, turn, backward to a stone structure. That caught his eye then, and he studied the eleven-foot object idly, noting the simple beauty of the work and the three figures adorning it. But his feet were moving again, carrying him forward. This was the place, and there was but one thing left to do.

The force of the grip on his shoulder nearly threw him from his feet, and he whirled to see her again beside him, panting hotly, her left fist clenched tightly and her right one still digging into the flesh of his arm.

"Thank God!" It was more than an exclamation as she whispered it through her teeth. "Didn't you hear me shouting? I called, but you were going on, and I thought I wouldn't make it…only somehow I did! Soldier, you can't go there! Wait!"

He was dull with the wonder of it, and the fierce, hot, foolish hope that flamed up in him as he gripped her and pulled her around before him. "How'd you find me, Anne? How could you trail me the way I went?"

She stopped to catch some of her breath, and she was limp and trembling from running as she held onto him. "I didn't; I knew better than to try. But I knew where you were going—the only place you could go. So I came after you. You should have waited. It would have been so much easier."

The flame was dying out of him, and he shook his head. "It's no use. You shouldn't have come, you know."

"I don't know, soldier. Do you think I'd have come after you to see you go there, unless there was some hope I could keep you from it? That's why I took so long, telephoning, waiting, arguing, and finally driving out here, afraid to find you already gone, but just praying I wouldn't." She was pulling him back now, into one of the shadows, and out of it again, to where a half-hidden figure was standing. "Father fixed it for me to see him finally and I forced him to come with me."

The figure was moving toward them now, and the boy could make out four stars on the shoulders of the uniform. Anne's father must be somebody, he thought, to arrange an interview at such an hour; and Anne herself had performed no small miracle in bringing a general out here on a crazy mission she couldn't have explained fully.

"Well, young man!" There was a bluff heartiness to the general's voice that didn't entirely cover other emotions. "This young lady tells me you're looking for work to help your country again, and she tells it so well I'm out of my bed and out here to see you. If her story hadn't been so completely insane, I'd have thought she was. I am myself, or I wouldn't be here. Let's have a look at you, over here in the light from my headlights."

He stared for long minutes, silently, nodding faintly to himself, while the younger man could feel his flesh crawl with doubt of the outcome. Finally the general turned away, and he could hear Anne's breath catch.

"Well?" she asked, and for the first time her voice quivered.

The older man shook himself, and his eyes were on neither of them, but directed outward toward the horizon. "For some reason, I believe it. I wondered, riding here, when I was foolish enough to imagine things, what it would feel like if I found you were correct, Miss Bowman. I told myself I'd be afraid, incredulous, and perhaps half mad. Now I find I'm none of those things. If God or whatever other Power rules in this has arranged it as it seems to be, I guess those of us who discover it will be protected by His will. All I can feel is something I've felt when I saw what men can do in battle…My God, what a magnificent propaganda story; and what a pity nobody'd ever believe it. Young man, do you know what that monument is that you were looking at?"

He looked back at it. "No, sir."

"That's the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. He was one of those who fell in France without any trace to indicate who he was. He was selected and brought back here in 1921, and ten years later they erected that in his honor—or, rather, in honor to all those who fell over there without names that could be honored personally. That monument stands as a symbol of our obligation to the men whose efforts brought us victory before. And you came out of there." The general stopped then, looking for a response, but there was none, and he continued: "You don't owe your nation anything, son; it owes you."

"So I'm a ghost then." He turned it over in his head, but already it was as if he'd received the knowledge long ago. "Or am I the personalization of the thoughts of all the people who've been aware of me—or even a little of each? I'm apparently physical enough—I seem to weigh as much as I did before. I can do anything a living man can, phantom or not. No, sir, the dead can never have claims on the living, except to ask them to carry on. And if I'm returned, it's because there is something I can do. I want to do it—you've honored me, or those I represent, long enough; now you're in the same old struggle, and it's my turn to serve again. If you can help me find something, that's all the honor I—or those others—can ask."

"But if I made you a soldier in the present army, would it be fair for you to take up arms against the…the living, if you can carry arms and still fight? Or if we only see you by some trick of illusion that fools even yourself, could you help in a purely physical army?"

He thought it over slowly, silently accepting a smoke from the other; to him, the cigarette answered the last—if it were illusion, such an illusion might kill as easily as consume beer or blow smoke from his mouth. But could the dead be killed again—if he belonged to the truly dead? And if they could not, then surely he had no right to injure those who could not harm him. "Sorry, sir. It was good of you to come out here, but since you've shown me there's nothing I can do—" He began a salute, only to check it as his eyes rested again on the guard pacing back and forth up there.

"Those guards! They're living soldiers, and you could use them in combat. Then, why can't I do their work—there'd be no need to kill in that? And the men…How many? Two-hour shifts on and eight off were usual guard hours, with the next day free. The six men I replaced could be used far better than I could as an individual. I have no need of food or sleep or rest; of that I'm sure. Why shouldn't I take that on a full-day, full-week shift, sir?"

"Unthinkable. What's the purpose of having a guard of honor when the dead do their own guarding?"

"Do you think the dead want that guard, sir, when their country needs men? Isn't it only necessary because civilian morale requires that the customs—most of them—of peacetime be maintained?"

"No." The general's voice ended all argument. "No, son, I can't see it. And I'm not going to look at you while you talk, to make sure you don't convince me…That wasn't the work you were cut out for; it would have been far easier to let six who might die of wounds or infection live. And I can think of no more futile work than standing guard twenty four hours a day over a tomb that we have reason to feel may now be empty, however necessary for morale."

"But, sir—"

The general smiled, but kept his eyes averted. "No. Ten minutes ago, I'd have defied any proof that the dead could walk; I came only to humor the whim of the daughter of a very close friend and because I felt the ride might do me good. Now, just looking at you, I'm taking it for granted that that sarcophagus is empty. That's why I won't look at you, and why I'm willing to let Miss Bowman tell you her idea."

He looked questioningly at the girl, who held out a paper, opened in the middle. "I wanted to show you that, soldier, but you ran off first. I knew, after what you'd told me, that it was the answer. But I knew you'd never listen to me alone."

He took it from her, noting it was a later edition of the same paper he'd bought that afternoon, opened to the editorial page where the same cartoon and editorial struck his eye. But the column between was different, and set in heavy-leaded type. It was titled quite simply, "APOLOGY!" and his eyes caught the first words and led him on.

> To the readers of this paper and to a certain energetic young man who broke into this office to "push my face in," I want to apologize. I don't know who he was, nor do I care; I couldn't describe him to you, beyond the fact that he appeared to be a soldier in a rather sloppy uniform. But whoever he was, I'm grateful to him.
>
> He told me with complete candor that I was a fool. I agree. I have been a fool. I've been writing here for the last months as only a paid mouthpiece of the enemy should write, though in my own biased way I thought I was serving my country. I wasn't. The ideas could serve no one save the enemy.
>
> So, after three hours of careful thought, my opinion now is that the decent readers of this paper should know, and probably do know, that all I've written has been lies—sheer, stupid lies. We're in no danger from England, or Russia, or any other ally who helps us in this war. We're in danger only from the knaves and fools who fill our minds with defeatism and the filth of which I have been as guilty as any. This probably means I'll lose my job, and you'll see another name here in later editions.
>
> Why? Because, if you see the truth, you'll know who your real enemies are, and they don't want that. Because some people would rather cling to their own interests, would rather watch this nation perish, than give up one iota of their stupidity or their profits.
>
> There have been too many lies to list here; it were better to refer you to the back columns I've written and tell you simply that the men who repeat them are your enemies. There is no truth in them, only plausibility and cheap emotional trickery. But one I must point out while

> I still can. You've heard us say, "If you do thus and so, can you face the soldiers when they return again?" and it made a strong emotional appeal for every cheap purpose we were furthering. Now, I refer you to a well-known poem, of which I quote the last lines only:
>
> *If you fail us who die, we shall not sleep,*
> *Though poppies grow in Flanders Field.*
>
> You know the source, surely. Well, we—this newspaper and myself—have failed those dead, and the dead of this war, grievously. For that no apology is enough, but for the little good it may do, I apologize.

He was silent as he finished it. He'd been so sure he'd failed; he'd said nothing new, surely, that hadn't been said before. Yet, this was the result.

"You see?" the general broke in on his thoughts. "However you do it—by your eyes, or some driving force we lack, you walk around in a sort of aura that makes others believe pretty much what you want them to. My own present belief in you, Anne Bowman's faith—don't they suggest a better job than guarding an empty tomb?"

He nodded slowly, the idea still too new, and Anne picked up. "I'd read this before, and wondered about it; everyone was discussing it, and I couldn't be sure at first, but I suspected you. Then when you told me of seeing the editor, I knew. But you ran off before I could tell you; like a fool, I guess, I was going to surprise you later instead of telling you at once." He looked slowly from one to the other, still only half believing.

"You mean—"

"Nothing else," the general agreed. "You found your own job, because you were meant for it, apparently, only you were too blinded by desire for direct action to realize it. There are still plenty of people in this world of ours who are fighting us from within. Some of them do it deliberately—nothing much you can do about that, I suppose; but the real trouble comes from the sincere men who are blinded by prejudices against which none of our arguments or propaganda can make headway. You'll be a godsend to us, son, if you'll report to me in the morning. We'll give you some official but meaningless commission and let you follow your own impulses, unless you want to take suggestions. Well?"

It was obvious, of course; it should have been obvious from the time he'd first noticed the protection he'd seemed to be under; the willingness of Anne to believe him. Some glamor surrounded him, and he wasn't sure that it worked only on those who were for the same things he wanted—

there'd been the German, who'd seen him differently. Maybe, he thought, the general was wrong about his being able to do nothing to the deliberately treasonous, judging by that.

He grinned and nodded.

"In the morning, sir. And—did the writer get fired? Umm. Then, perhaps, sir, I know where my first duty will lie." His hand came up in brisk salute, and the officer returned it before starting toward the car door.

"In the morning, then, and do as you like. Coming back with me, Miss Bowman?"

She shook her head. "I think not, thank you. I haven't had a good walk in ages, and it'll do me good."

The lights of the car swung and headed back, leaving them alone in the shadows near the Tomb. He stood awkwardly looking at her, and she was laughing softly at his expression.

"I guessed, soldier; somehow, it wasn't hard to guess, after I saw a small feature story in this afternoon's newspaper about a guard out here who thought he saw a ghost come out of the Tomb. The poor fellow's probably in trouble about it, but that can all be straightened out now. Anyway, the description, what there was of it, fitted you. That satisfy your curiosity?"

"No, Anne; that's unimportant. I'm wondering about you. You know what I seem to be—as much as we can know. And yet—Someday, this war will be over, and when that happens, what becomes of me? Do I go back there? Even forgetting that, how can I fit into the lives of others? Obviously—"

"Shh. Don't say it." Her hand was on his shoulder again, gently this time. "You needn't worry about that—it isn't that which I feel for you, soldier. Once, under other circumstances, perhaps, but now it's only a very deep and genuine friendship and a desire to help—nothing more."

"I'm glad, Anne." He meant it. All the things he'd feared she felt were obviously a part of his former life's possibilities, but none belonged to him now. They had been gone twenty-five years, and he couldn't even miss them now. "I'm glad and relieved. I—need friends in this strange new world, but…"

"Let's forget it," she advised, settling back onto a rock. "A smoke together, and then you can walk me home. It's almost dawn already. Wonder how you'll look in your new uniform?"

It was dawn when they reached the bridge this time, almost the double of the dawn into which he had come out. But this time, as he walked quietly along beside the girl, there was no uncertainty, no shuffle. He had work to do, and a friend to explain the puzzle of his new life to him.

And, once again, he had his country. Already, as they neared the end of the bridge and the mist began fading, he could see flags flying here and there in celebration of the Fourth, anniversary of the country's birth. Perhaps it would be more solemn this year than in peacetime, perhaps not, but certainly to more people its original meaning would be nearer. To the others who did not care for that meaning, perhaps he was at least a partial answer. He was content, as he walked along beside the girl toward his new work, to know that whatever might be her future or his own, it was a part of the future of America; at the moment, he wanted no more.

The Smallest God

I

Dr. Arlington Brugh led his visitor around a jumble of machinery that made sense only to himself, and through a maze of tables and junk that occupied most of his laboratory.

"It's a little disordered just now," he apologized, glad that his assistant had been able to clear up the worst of the mess. "Sort of gets that way after a long experiment."

Herr Dr. Ernst Meyer nodded heavy agreement. "*Ja*, so. Und mit all dis matchinery, no vunder. It gives yet no goot place v'ere I can mit comfort vork, also in mine own laboradory. Und v'at haff ve here?"

"That's Hermes—my mascot." Brugh picked up the little, hollow rubber figure of the god Hermes; Mercury, the Romans called him. "The day I bought him for my daughter, the funds for my cyclotron were voted on favorably, so I've kept him here. Just a little superstition."

Meyer shook his head. "*Nein*. I mean here." He tapped a heavy lead chest bearing a large *Keep Out* label. "Is maybe v'at you make?"

"That's right." The physical chemist pulled up the heavy cover and displayed a few dirty crystals in a small compartment and a thick, tarry goo that filled a half-liter beaker. "Those are my latest success and my first failure. By the way, have you seen Dr. Hodges over in the biochemistry department?"

"*Ja*. Vonderful vork he makes yet, *nicht wahr*?"

"Umm. Opinions differ. I'll admit he did a good job in growing that synthetic amoeba, and the worm he made in his chemical bath wasn't so bad, though I never did know whether it was really alive or not. Maybe you read about it? But he didn't stick to simple things until he mastered his technique. He had to go rambling off trying to create a synthetic man."

Meyer's rough face gleamed. "*Ja*, so. Dot is *hübsch*—nice. Mit veins und muschles. Only it is not mit life upfilled."

Brugh sifted a few of the crystals in the chest out onto a watch glass where they could be inspected more carefully. Then he put them into an opened drawer and closed it until the crystals were in a much dimmer light. In the semidarkness, a faint gleam was visible, hovering over the watch glass.

"Radioactive," he explained. "There is the reason Hodges' man isn't filled with life. If there had been some of this in his chemical bath when he was growing Anthropos—that's what he calls the thing—it would be walking around today. But you can't expect a biochemist to know that, of course. They don't keep up with the latest developments the way the physical chemists do. Most of them aren't aware of the fact that the atom can be cracked up into a different kind of atom by using Bertha."

"Bert'a? Maybe she is die daughter?"

Brugh grinned. "Bertha's the cyclotron over there. The boys started calling her Big Bertha, and then we just named her Bertha for short." He swung around to indicate the great mass of metal that filled one end of the room. "That's a lot of material to make so few crystals of radioactive potassium chloride, though."

"Ach, so. Den it is das radioagdivated salt dot vould give life to der synt'etic man, eh?"

"Right. We're beginning to believe that life is a combination of electricity and radioactivity, and the basis of the last seems to be this active potassium we've produced by bombarding the ordinary form with neutrons. Put that in Anthropos and he'd be bouncing around for his meals in a week."

Meyer succeeded in guessing the meaning of the last and cocked up a bushy eyebrow. "Den v'y not das salt to der man give?"

"And have Hodges hog all the glory again? Not a chance." He banged his hand on the chest for emphasis, and the six-inch figure of Hermes bounced from its precarious perch and took off for the watch glass. Brugh grabbed frantically and caught it just before it hit. "Someday I'll stuff this thing with something heavy enough to hold it down."

The German looked at the statue with faint interest, then pointed to the gummy mess in the beaker. "Und dis?"

"That's a failure. Someday I might analyze a little of it, but it's too hard to get the stuff out of that tar, and probably not worth a quarter of the energy. Seems to be a little of everything in it, including potassium, and it's fairly radioactive, but all it's good for is—well, to stuff Hermes so he can't go bouncing around."

Brugh propped the little white figure against a ring stand and drew out the beaker, gouging out a chunk of the varicolored tar. He plopped it into a container and poured methyl alcohol over it, working with a glass rod until it was reasonably plastic. "Darned stuff gets soft, but it won't dissolve," he grumbled.

Meyer stood back, looking on, shaking his head gently. Americans were naturally crazy, but he hadn't expected such foolishness from so distinguished a research man as Dr. Brugh. In his own laboratory, he'd have spent the next two years, if necessary, in finding out what the tar was, instead of wasting it to stuff a cheap rubber cast of a statue.

"Dis *Herr* Dr. Hodges, you don't like him, I t'ink. *Warum*?"

Brugh was spooning the dough into his statue, forcing it into the tiny mouth and packing it in loosely. "Hodges wanted a new tank for his life-culture experiments when I was trying to get the cyclotron and the cloud chamber. I had to dig up the old antivivisection howl among the students' parents to keep him from getting it, and he thought it was a dirty trick. Maybe it was; anyway, he's been trying ever since to get me kicked out, and switch the appropriations over to this department. By the way, I'd hate to have word of this get around."

"*Aber*—andivifisegtion!" Meyer was faintly horrified at such an unscientific thing.

Brugh nodded. "I know. But I wanted that cyclotron, and I got it; I'd do worse. There, Hermes won't go flying around again. Anything else I can show you, Dr. Meyer?"

"Tank you, no. Der clock is late now, und I must cadge my train by die hour. It has a bleasure been, Dr. Brugh."

"Not at all." Brugh set the statue on a table and went out with the German, leaving Hermes in sole possession of the laboratory, except for the cat.

II

The clock in the laboratory said four o'clock in the morning. Its hum and the gentle breathing of the cat, that exercised its special privileges by sleeping on the cyclotron, were the only noises to be heard. Up on the table Hermes stood quietly, just as Dr. Brugh had left him, a little white rubber figure outlined in the light that shone through from the outside. A very ordinary little statue he looked.

But inside, where the tar had been placed, something was stirring gently. Faintly and low at first, life began to quiver. Consciousness began to come slowly, and then a dim and hazy feeling of individuality. He was different in being a unit not directly connected in consciousness with the dim outlines of the laboratory.

What, where, when, who, why, and how? Hermes knew none of the answers, and the questions were only vague and hazy in his mind, but the desire to know and to understand was growing. He took in the laboratory slowly through the hole that formed his partly open mouth and let the light stream in against the resinous matter inside. At first, only a blur was visible, but as his "eyes" grew more proficient from experience, he made out separate shapes. He had no names for them, but he recognized the difference between a round tube and a square tabletop.

The motion of the second hand caught his attention, and he studied the clock carefully, but could make no sense to it. Apparently some things moved and others didn't. What little he could see of himself didn't, even when he made a clumsy attempt at forcing motion into his outthrust arm. It took longer to notice the faint breathing of the cat; then he noticed it not only moved, but did so in an irregular fashion. He strained toward it, and something clicked in his mind.

Tabby was dreaming, but Hermes couldn't know that, nor understand from whence came the pictures that seemed to flash across his gummy brain; Tabby didn't understand dreams, either. But the little god could see some tiny creature that went scurrying rapidly across the floor, and a much-distorted picture of Tabby following it. Tabby had a definitely exaggerated idea of herself. Now the little running figure began to grow until it was twice the size of the cat, and its appearance altered. It made harsh explosive noises and beat a thick tail stiffly. Tabby's picture made a noise and fled, but the other followed quickly and a wide mouth opened. Tabby woke up, and the pictures disappeared. Hermes could make no sense of them, though it was plain in Tabby's mind that such things often happened when her head turned black inside.

But the cat awake was even more interesting than she was sleeping. There were the largest groups of loosely classified odors, sights, and sensations to be absorbed, the nicest memories of moving about and exploring the laboratory. Through Tabby's eyes he saw the part of the laboratory that was concealed from him, and much of the outside in the near neighborhood. He also drew a hazy picture of himself being filled, but it made no sense to him, though he gathered from the cat's mind that the huge monster holding him was to be both despised and respected, and was, all in all, a very powerful person.

By now his intelligence was great enough to recognize that the world seen through the cat's eyes was in many ways wrong. For one thing, everything was in shades of white and black, with medial grays, while he had already seen that there were several colors. Hermes decided that he needed another point of view, though the cat had served admirably to start his mind on the way to some understanding of the world about him.

A low howling sound came from outside the laboratory, and Hermes recoiled mentally, drawing a picture of a huge and ferocious beast from his secondhand cat's memory. Then curiosity urged him to explore. If the cat's color sense was faulty, perhaps her ideas on the subject of dogs were also wrong. He thrust his mind out toward the source of the sound, and again there was the little click that indicated a bridge between two minds.

He liked the dog much better than the cat. There was more to be learned here, and the animal had some faint understanding of a great many mysteries which had never interested Tabby. Hermes also found that hard, selfish emotions were not the only kind. On the whole, the mind of Shep seemed warm and glowing after the frigid self-interest of Tabby.

First in the dog's mind, as in all others, was the thought of self, but close behind was mistress and master, the same person whom the cat's mind had pictured filling the god. And there were the two little missies. Something about the dog's mental image of one of them aroused an odd sensation in the little god, but it was too confused to be of any definite interest.

But the dog retained hazy ideas of words as a means of thought, and Hermes seized on them gratefully. He gathered that men used them as a medium of thought conveyance, and filed the sixty partly understood words of Shep's vocabulary carefully away. There were others with tantalizing possibilities, but they were vague.

Shep's world was much wider than that of Tabby, and his general impression of color—for dogs do see colors—was much better. The world became a fascinating place as he pictured it, and Hermes longed for the mysterious power of mobility that made wide explorations possible. He tried to glean the secret, but all that Shep knew on the subject was that movement followed desire, and sometimes came without any wish.

The god came to the conclusion that in all the world the only animals that could satisfy his curiosity were men. His mind was still too young to be bothered with such trifles as modesty, and he was quite sure there could be no animal with a better intelligence than he had. The dog couldn't even read thoughts, and Hermes had doubts about man's ability to do the same; otherwise, why should the master have punished Shep for fighting, when the other dog had clearly started it?

And if he hadn't, Shep would have been home, instead of skulking around this place, where he sometimes came to meet the master after work.

Hermes tried to locate a man's mind, but there was none near. He caught a vague eddy of jumbled thought waves from someone who was evidently located there to guard the building, but there was a definite limit to the space that thought could span.

The cat's brain had gone black inside again, with only fitful images flickering on and off, and the dog was drifting into a similar state. Hermes studied the action with keen interest and decided that sleep might be a very fine way of passing the time until a man came back to the laboratory, as he gathered they did every time some big light shone from somewhere high up above.

But as he concentrated on the matter of turning off his mind, he wondered again what he was. Certainly neither a dog nor a cat, he had no real belief that he was a man; the dog didn't know about him, but the cat regarded him as a stone. Maybe he was one, if stones ever came to life. Anyway, he'd find out in the morning when the master came in. Until then he forced thoughts from his mind and succeeded in simulating sleep.

III

A strange noise wakened Hermes in the morning. From what he had seen in Shep's mind, he knew it was the sound of human speech, and listened intently. The people were talking at a point behind him, but he was sure it was the master and one of the little missies. He tuned his mind in on that of the master and began soaking up impressions.

"I wish you'd stay away from young Thomas," Dr. Brugh was saying. "I think he's the nephew of Hodges, though he won't admit it. Your mother doesn't like him either, Tanya."

Tanya laughed softly at her father's suspicions, and Hermes felt a glow all over. It was a lovely sound. "You never like my boyfriends," she said. "I think you want me to grow up into an old-maid schoolmarm. Johnny's a nice boy. To hear you talk, a person would think Hodges and his whole family were ogres."

"Maybe they are." But Brugh knew better than to argue with his older daughter; she always won, just as her mother always did. "Hodges tried to swindle me out of my appropriations again at the meeting last night. He'd like to see me ruined."

"And you swindled him out of his tanks. Suppose I proved to the president who sent those anonymous vivisection letters to all the parents?"

Brugh looked around hastily, but there was no one listening. "Are you trying to blackmail me, Tanya?"

She laughed again at his attempt at anger. "You know I won't tell a soul. 'Bye, Dad. I'm going swimming with Johnny." Hermes felt a light kiss through Brugh's senses, and saw her start around the table to pass in front of him. He snapped the connection with the master's mind and prepared his own eyes for confirmation of what he had seen by telepathy.

Tanya was a vision of life and loveliness. In the fleeting second it took for her to cross the little god's range of sight, he took in the soft, waving brown hair, the dark, sparkling eyes, and the dimple that lurked in the corner of her mouth, and something happened to Hermes. As yet he had no word for it, but it was pure sensation that sped through every atom of his synthetic soul. He began to appreciate that life was something more than the satisfaction of curiosity.

A sound from Brugh, who was puttering around with a cloudy precipitate, snapped him back to reality. The questions in his mind still needed answering, and the physicist was the logical one to answer them. Again he made contact with the other's mind.

This was infinitely richer than the dog's and cat's combined. For one thing, there was a seemingly inexhaustible supply of word thoughts to be gleaned. As he absorbed them, thinking became easier, and the words provided a framework for abstractions, something utterly beyond the bounds of the animal minds. For half an hour he studied them, and absorbed the details of human life gradually.

Then he set about finding the reasons for his own life; that necessitated learning the whole field of physical chemistry, which occupied another half hour, and when he had finished, he began putting the knowledge he had gleaned together, until it made sense.

All life, he had found, was probably electricity and radioactivity, the latter supplied by means of a tiny amount of potassium in the human body. But life was really more than that. There were actions and interactions between the two things that had thus far baffled all students. Some of them baffled the rubber god, but he puzzled the general picture out to his own satisfaction.

When the experiment had gone wrong and created the tarry lump that formed the real life of Hermes, there had been a myriad compounds and odd arrangements of atom formed in it, and the tarry gum around them had acted as a medium for their operation. Then, when they were slightly softened by the addition of alcohol, they had begun to work, arranging and rearranging themselves into an interacting pattern that was roughly parallel to human life and thought.

But there were differences. For one thing, he could read thoughts accurately, and for another, he had a sense of perception which could analyze matter directly from its vibrations. For another, what he called sight and sound were merely other vibrations, acting directly on his life substance instead of by means of local sensory organs. He realized suddenly that he could see with his mouth instead of his eyes, and hear all over. Only the rubber casing prevented him from a full 360° vision. But, because of the minds he had tapped, he had learned to interpret those vibrations in a more or less conventional pattern.

Hermes analyzed the amount of radioactive potassium in Brugh's body carefully and compared it with his own. There was a great difference, which probably accounted for his more fully developed powers. Something ached vaguely inside him, and he felt giddy. He turned away from his carefully ordered thoughts to inspect this new sensation.

The alcohol inside him was drying out—almost gone, in fact, and his tarry interior was growing thicker. He'd have to do something about it.

"Dr. Brugh," he thought, fixing his attention on the other, "could I have some alcohol, please? My thoughts will be slowed even below human level if I can't have some soon."

Arlington Brugh shook his head to clear it of a sudden buzz, but he had not understood. Hermes tried again, using all the remaining thought power he could muster.

"This is Hermes, Dr. Brugh. You brought me to life, and I want some alcohol, please!"

Brugh heard this time, and swung suspiciously toward the end of the room, where his assistant was working. But the young man was engaged in his work, and showed no sign of having spoken or heard. Hermes repeated his request, squeezing out his fast failing energy, and the master jerked quickly, turning his eyes slowly around the room. Again Hermes tried, and the other twitched.

Brugh grabbed for his hat and addressed the assistant. "Bill, I'm going for a little walk to clear my head. The session last night seems to have put funny ideas in it." He paused. "Oh, better toss that little rubber statue into the can for the junkman. It's beginning to get on my nerves."

He turned sharply and walked out of the room. Hermes felt the rough hands of the assistant, and felt himself falling. But his senses were leaving him, drained by the loss of alcohol and the strain of forcing his mind on the master. He sank heavily into the trash can and his mind grew blank.

IV

A splatter of wetness against Hermes' mouth brought him back to consciousness, and he saw a few drops fall near him from a broken bottle that was tipped sidewise. Occasionally one found its way through his mouth, and he soaked it up greedily. Little as he got, the alcohol still had been enough to start his dormant life into renewed activity.

There was a pitch and sway to the rubbish on which he lay, and a rumbling noise came from in front of him. Out of the corner of his "eye" he saw a line of poles running by, and knew he was on something that moved. Momentarily he tapped the mind of the driver and found he was on a truck bound for the city dump, where all garbage was disposed of. But he felt no desire to use the little energy he had in mind reading, so he fell back to studying the small supply of liquid left in the bottle.

There was an irregular trickle now, running down only a few inches from him. He studied the situation carefully, noting that the bottle was well anchored to its spot, while he was poised precariously on a little mound of rubbish. One of Newton's laws of momentum flashed through his mind from the mass of information he had learned through Brugh; if the truck were to speed up, he would be thrown backward, directly under the stream trickling down from the bottle—and with luck he might land face up.

Hermes summoned his energy and directed a wordless desire for speed toward the driver. The man's foot came down slowly on the accelerator, but too slowly. Hermes tried again, and suddenly felt himself pitched backward—to land face down! Then a squeal of brakes reached his ears, as the driver counteracted his sudden speed, and the smallest god found himself rolling over, directly under the stream.

There were only a few teaspoons left, splashing out irregularly as the bouncing of the truck threw the liquid back and forth in the fragment of glass, but most of them reached his mouth. The truck braked to a halt and began reversing, and the last drops fell against his lips. It was highly impure alcohol, filled with raw chemicals from the laboratory, but Hermes had no complaints. He could feel the tar inside him soften, and he lay quietly enjoying the sensation until new outside stimuli caught his attention.

The truck had ceased backing and was parked on a slope leading down toward the rear. There was a rattle of chains and the gate dropped down to let the load go spinning out down the bank into the rubbish-filled gully. Hermes bounced from a heavy can and went caroming off sidewise, then struck against a rock with force enough to send white sparks of pain running through him.

But the rock had changed his course and thrown him clear of the other trash. When he finally stopped, his entire head and one arm were clear, and the rest was buried under only a loose litter of papers and dirt. No permanent damage had been done; his tarry core was readjusting itself to the normal shape of the rubber coating, and he was in no immediate danger.

But being left here was the equivalent of a death sentence. His only hope was to contact some human mind and establish friendly communications, and the dump heap was the last place to find men. Added to that, the need for further alcohol was a serious complication. Again he wished for the mysterious power of motion.

He concentrated his mental energy on moving the free arm, but there was no change; the arm stayed at the same awkward angle. With little hope, he tried again, watching for the slightest movement. This time a finger bent slightly! Feverishly he tried to move the others, and they twisted slowly until his whole hand lay stretched out flat. Then his arm began to move sluggishly. He was learning.

It was growing dark when he finally drew himself completely free of the trash and lay back to rest, exulting over his newfound ability. The alcohol was responsible, of course; it had softened the tar slightly more than it had been when he made his first efforts in the laboratory, and permitted motion of a sort through a change of surface tension. The answer to further motion was more alcohol.

There were bottles of all kinds strewn about, and he stared at those within his range of vision, testing their vibrations in the hope of finding a few more drops. The nearer ones were empty, except for a few that contained brackish rainwater. But below him, a few feet away, was a small-sized one whose label indicated that it had contained hair tonic. The cork was in tightly, and it was still half full of a liquid. That liquid was largely ethyl alcohol.

Hermes forced himself forward on his stomach, drawing along inch by inch. Without the help of gravity, he could never have made it, but the distance shortened. He gave a final labored hitch, clutched the bottle in his tiny hands, and tried to force the cork out. It was wedged in too firmly!

Despair clutched at him, but he threw it off. There must be some way. Glass was brittle, could be broken easily, and there were stones and rocks about with which to strike it. The little god propped the neck of the bottle up against one and drew himself up to a sitting position, one of the stones in his hands. He could not strike rapidly enough to break the glass, but had to rely on raising the rock and letting it fall.

Fortunately for his purpose, the bottle had been cracked by its fall, and the fourth stone shattered the neck. Hermes forced it up on a broken box and tipped it gingerly toward his mouth. The smell of it was sickening, but he had no time to be choosy about his drinks! There was room inside him to hold a dozen teaspoonfuls, and he meant to fill those spaces.

The warm sensation of softening tar went through him gratefully as the liquid was absorbed. According to what he had read in Brugh's mind, he should have been drunk, but it didn't feel that way. It more nearly approximated the sensation of a man who had eaten more than he should and hadn't time to be sorry yet.

Hermes wriggled his toes comfortably and nodded his approval at the ease with which they worked. Another idea came to him, and he put it to the test. Where his ear channels were, the rubber was almost paper-thin; he put out a pseudopod of tar from the lumps inside his head and wriggled it against the membrane; a squeaky sound was produced like a radio speaker gone bad. He varied the speed of the feeler, alternating it until he discovered the variation of tones and overtones necessary, and tried a human word.

"Tanya!" It wasn't perfect, but there could be no question as to what it was. Now he could talk with men directly, even with Tanya Brugh, if fate was particularly kind. He conjured up an ecstatic vision of her face and attempted a conventional sighing sound. Men in love evidently were supposed to sigh, and Hermes was in love! But if he wanted to see her, he'd have to leave the dump. It was dark now, but ultraviolet and infrared light were as useful to him as the so called visible beams, and the amount of light needed to set off his sight was less than that for a cat. With soiled hands he began pulling his way up the bank, burrowing through the surface rubbish. Then he reached the top and spied the main path leading away.

His little feet twinkled brightly in the starlight, and the evening dew washed the stains from his body. A weasel, prowling for food, spied him and debated attack, but decided to flee when the little god pictured himself as a dog. Animals accepted such startling apparent changes without doubting their sanity. He chuckled at the tricks he could play on Tabby when he got back, and sped down the lane at a good two miles an hour.

V

Brugh worked late in the laboratory, making up for the time he had taken off to clear his head. All thoughts of his trouble with Hermes had vanished. He cleared up the worst of the day's litter of dirty apparatus, arranged things for the night, and locked up.

Dixon, head of the organic chemistry department, was coming down the hall as the physicist left. He stopped, his pudgy face beaming, and greeted the other. "Hi, there, Brugh. Working late again?"

"A little. How's the specific for tuberculosis going?" Dixon patted his paunch amiably. "Not bad. We're able to get the metal poison into the dye, and the dye into the bug. We still can't get much of the poison out of the dye after that to kill our friend, the bacillus, but we've been able to weaken him a little. By the way, I saw your daughter today, out with Hodges' nephew, and she told me—"

"You mean Johnny Thomas?" Brugh's eyebrows furrowed tightly and met at the corners. "So Hodges is his uncle! Hmmm."

"Still fighting the biochemistry department?" By a miracle of tact and good nature, Dixon had managed to keep on friendly terms with both men. "I wish you two would get together; Hodges is really a pretty decent sort…Well, I didn't think so; you're both too stubborn for your own good. That nephew of his isn't so good, though. Came up here to pump money out of his uncle and get away from some scandal in New York. His reputation isn't any too savory. Wouldn't want my daughter going with him."

"Don't worry; Tanya won't be going with Hodges' nephew any…longer. Thanks for the tip." They reached the main door, and Brugh halted suddenly. "Damn!"

"What is it?"

"I left my auto keys on the worktable upstairs. Don't bother waiting for me, Dixon. I'll see you in the morning."

Dixon smiled. "Absentminded professor, eh? All right, good night." He went out the door and down the steps while Brugh climbed back to his laboratory, where he found the keys without further trouble. Fortunately he carried a spare door key to the lab in his pocket; it wasn't the first time he'd done this fool trick.

As he passed down the hall again, a faint sound of movement caught his ear and he turned toward Hodges' laboratory. There was no one there, and the door was locked, the lights all out. Brugh started for the stairs, then turned back.

"Might as well take advantage of an opportunity when I get it," he muttered. "I'd like to see the creation of Hodges, as long as he won't know about it." He slipped quietly to the door, unlocked it, and pulled it shut after him. The one key unlocked every door in the building and the main entrance; he had too much trouble losing keys to carry more than needed with him.

There was no mistaking the heavy tank on the low table, and Brugh moved quietly to it, lifted the cover, and stared inside. There was a light in the tank that went on automatically when the cover was raised, and the details of the body inside were clearly defined. Brugh was disappointed; he had been hoping for physical defects, but the figure was that of a young man, almost too classically perfect in body, and with an intelligent, handsome face. There was even a healthy pink glow to the skin.

But there was no real life, no faintest spark of animation or breathing. Anthropos lay in his nutritive bath, eyes open, staring blankly at the ceiling and seeing nothing. "No properly radioactive potassium," Brugh gloated. "In a way, it's a pity, too. I'd like to work on you."

He put the cover down and crept out again, making sure that the night watchman was not around. The man seldom left the first floor, anyway; who'd steal laboratory equipment? Brugh reached for his keys and fumbled with them, trying to find the proper one. It wasn't on the key ring. "Damn!" he said softly. "I suppose it fell off back on the table."

But he still had the spare, and the other could stay on the table. With the duplicate, he opened and relocked the door, then slipped down the hall to leave the building. Again a faint sound reached him, but he decided it was the cat or a rat moving around. He had other worries. Mrs. Brugh would give him what-for for being late again, he supposed. And Tanya probably wouldn't be home yet from the beach. That was another thing to be attended to; there'd be no more running with that young Thomas!

In the latter supposition, he was wrong; Tanya was there, fooling with her hair and gushing to her mother about a date she had that night with Will Young. She usually had seven dates a week with at least four different men serving as escorts. Brugh thoroughly approved of Young, however, since he was completing his Ph.D. work and acting as lab assistant. Mrs. Brugh approved of him because the young man came from a good family and had independent means, without the need of the long grind up to a full professorship. Tanya was chiefly interested in his six-foot-two, his football reputation, and a new Dodge he owned.

Margaret Brugh spied her husband coming through the door and began her usual worried harangue about his health and overwork. He muttered something about a lost key, and Tanya changed the subject for him. Brugh threw her a grateful smile and went in to wash up. He decided to postpone the lecture on Thomas until after supper; then she was in too much of a hurry to be bothered, and he put it off until morning.

The old Morris chair was soothing after a full meal—so soothing that the paper fell from his lap and scattered itself over the floor unnoticed, until the jangling of the telephone brought him back with a jerk. "It's for you," his wife announced.

The voice was that of Hodges, his nasal Vermont twang unmistakable. "Brugh? Your latest brainstorm backfired on you! I've got evidence against you this time, so you'd better bring it back." The pitch of the voice indicated fury that was only partly controlled.

The back hairs on Brugh's neck bristled up hotly, and his voice snapped back harshly. "You're drunk or crazy, like all biochemists! I haven't done anything to you. Anyway, what is it you want back?"

"You wouldn't know? How touching, such innocence! I want Anthropos, my synthetic man. I suppose you weren't in the laboratory this evening?"

Brugh gulped, remembering the faint noises he had heard. So it had all been a trap! "I never—"

"Of course. But we had trouble before—someone trying to force his way in—and we set up a photoelectric eye and camera with film for UV light. Didn't expect to catch you, but there's a nice picture of your face on it, and your key is in the lock—the number shows it's yours. I didn't think even you would stoop to stealing!"

Brugh made strangling sounds. "I didn't steal your phony man; wouldn't touch the thing! Furthermore, I didn't leave a key. Go sleep your insanity off!"

"Are you going to return Anthropos?"

"I don't have him." Brugh slammed the receiver down in disgust, snorting. If Hodges thought that he could put such a trick over, he'd find out better. With all the trumped-up evidence in the world, they'd still have to prove a few things. He'd see the president in the morning before Hodges could get to him.

But he wasn't prepared for the doorbell a half hour later, nor for the blue-coated figures that stood outside. They wasted no time.

"Dr. Arlington Brugh? We have a warrant for your arrest, charge being larceny. If you'll just come along quietly—"

They were purposeful individuals, and words did no good. Brugh went along—but not quietly.

VI

Hermes spied the public highway below him, and began puzzling about which direction to take back to town. Brugh had never been out this way, and he had failed to absorb the necessary information from the garbage man, so he had no idea of the location of Gorton. But there was a man leaning against a signpost, and he might know.

The little god approached him confidently, now that he could both move and talk. He wanted to try his new power instead of telepathy, and did not trouble with the man's thoughts, though a faint impression indicated they were highly disordered.

"Good evening, sir," he said pleasantly, with only a faint blur to the words. "Can you direct me to Gorton University?"

The man clutched the signpost and gazed down solemnly, blinking his eyes. "Got 'em again," he said dispassionately. "And after cutting down on the stuff, too. 'Sfunny, they never talked before. Wonder if the snakes'll talk, too, when I begin seeing them?"

It made no sense to Hermes, but he nodded wisely and repeated his question. From the vibrations, the man was not unacquainted with the virtues of alcohol.

The drunk pursed his lips and examined the little figure calmly. "Never had one like you before. What are you?"

"I suppose I'm a god," Hermes answered. "Can you direct me to Gorton, please?"

"So it's gods this time, eh? That's what I get for changing brands. Go away and let me drink in peace." He thought it over slowly as he drew out the bottle. "Want a drink?"

"Thank you, yes." The little god stretched up and succeeded in reaching the bottle. This time he filled himself to capacity before handing it back. It was worse than the hair tonic, but there was no question of its tar-softening properties. "Could you—?"

"I know. Gorton. To your right and follow the road." The man paused and made gurgling noises. "Whyn't you stick around? I like you; snakes never would drink with me."

Hermes made it quite clear he couldn't stay, and the drunk nodded gravely. "Always women. I know about that; it's a woman that drove me to this—seeing you. 'Stoo bad. Well, so long!"

Filled with the last drink, the god stepped his speed up to almost five miles an hour. There was no danger of fatigue, since the radioactive energy within him poured out as rapidly as he could use it, and there were no waste products to poison his system. His tiny legs flickered along the road, and the little feet made faint tapping sounds on the smooth asphalt surface.

He came over a hill and spied the yellow lights of Gorton, still an hour's trot away. It might have been worse. The swishing of the water inside him bothered him, and he decided that he'd stick to straight alcohol hereafter; whiskey contained too many useless impurities. Hermes flopped over beside the road, and let the water and some of the oil from the hair tonic trickle out; the alcohol was already well inside his gummy interior where there was no danger of losing it. For some reason, it seemed to be drying out more slowly than the first had, and that was all to the good.

The few cars on the road aroused a faint desire for some easier means of locomotion, but otherwise they caused him no trouble. He clipped off the miles at a steady gait, keeping on the edge of the paving, until the outskirts of the town had been reached. Then he took to the sidewalk.

A blue-coated figure, ornamented with brass buttons, was pacing down the street toward him, and Hermes welcomed the presence of the policeman. One of the duties of an officer was directing people, he had gathered, and a little direction would be handy. The smallest god stopped and waited for the other to reach him.

"Could you direct me to the home of Dr. Arlington Brugh, please?"

The cop looked about carefully for the speaker. Hermes raised his voice again. "I'm here, sir."

Officer O'Callahan dropped his eyes slowly, expecting a drunk, and spied the god. He let out a startled bellow. "So it's tricks, is it now? Confound that Bergen fellow, after drivin' the brats wild about ventriloquence. Come out o' there, you spalpeen. Tryin' your tricks on an honest police, like as if I didn't have worries o' me own."

Hermes watched the officer hunting around in the doorways for what he believed must be the source of the voice, and decided that there was no use lingering. He put one foot in front of the other and left the cop.

"Pssst!" The sound came from an alley a couple of houses below, and Hermes paused. In the shadows, he made out a dirty old woman, her frowsy hair blowing about her face, her finger crooked enticingly. Evidently she wanted something, and he turned in hesitantly.

"That dumb Irish mick," she grunted, and from her breath Hermes recognized another kindred spirit; apparently humans were much easier to get along with when thoroughly steeped in alcohol, as he was himself. "Sure, now, a body might think it's never a word he'd heard o' the Little Folks, and you speaking politely, too. Ventriloquence, indeed! Was you wanting to know what I might be telling you?"

Hermes stretched his rubber face into a passable smile. "Do you know where Dr. Arlington Brugh lives? He's a research director at Gorton University."

She shook her head, blinking bleary eyes. "That I don't, but maybe you'd take the university? It's well I know where that may be."

Dr. Brugh lived but a short distance from the campus, he knew, and once on the university grounds, Hermes would have no trouble in finding the house. He nodded eagerly. She reached down a filthy hand and caught him up, wrapping a fold of her tattered dress about him.

"Come along, then. I'll be taking you there myself." She paused to let the few last drops trickle from a bottle into her wide mouth, and stuck her head out cautiously; the policeman had gone. With a grunt of satisfaction, she struck across the street to a streetcar stop.

"'Tis the last dime I have, but a sorry day it'll be when Molly McCann can't do a favor for a Little Folk."

She propped herself against the carstop post and waited patiently, while Hermes pondered the mellowing effects of alcohol again. When the noisy car stopped, she climbed on, clutching him firmly, and he heard only the bumping of a flat wheel and her heavy breathing. But she managed to keep half awake, and carried him off the car at the proper place.

She set him down as gently as unsteady fingers would permit and pointed vaguely at the buildings on the campus. "There you be, and it's the best of luck I'm wishing you. Maybe, now that I've helped a Little Man, good luck'll be coming to me. A very good night to you."

Hermes bowed gravely as he guessed she expected. "My thanks, Molly McCann, for your kindness, and a very good night to you." He watched her totter away, and turned toward the laboratory building, where he could secure a few more drops of straight alcohol. After that, he could attend to his other business.

VII

Tanya Brugh was completely unaware of the smallest god's presence as he stood on a chair looking across at her. A stray beam of moonlight struck her face caressingly, and made her seem a creature of velvet and silver, withdrawn in sleep from all that was mundane. Hermes probed her mind gently, a little fearfully.

Across her mind, a flickering pageant of tall men, strong men, lithe and athletic men, ran in disordered array, and none of them was less than six feet tall. Hermes gazed at his own small body, barely six inches high; it would never do. Now the face of John Thomas fitted itself on one of the men, and Tanya held the image for a few seconds. The god growled mut tered oaths; he had no love for the Thomas image. Then it flickered into the face of Will Young, Brugh's assistant.

Hermes had probed her thoughts to confirm his own ideas of the wonderful delight that Tanya must be, and he was faintly disappointed. In her mind were innocence and emptiness—except for men of tall stature. He sighed softly, and reverted to purely human rationalization until he had convinced himself of the rightness of her thoughts.

But the question of height bothered him. Children, he knew, grew up, but he was no child, though his age was measured in hours. Someway, he must gain a new body, or grow taller, and that meant that Dr. Brugh would be needed for advice on the riddle of height increase.

He dropped quietly from the chair and trotted toward the master's bedroom, pushing against the door in the hope that it might be open. It wasn't, but he made a leap for the doorknob and caught it, throwing his slight weight into the job of twisting it. Finally, the knob turned, and he kicked out against the doorjamb with one foot until the door began to swing. Then he dropped down and pushed until he could slide through the opening. For his size, he carried a goodly portion of strength in his gum-and-rubber body.

But the master was not in the bed, and the mistress was making slow strangling sounds that indicated emotional upset. From Brugh's mind, Hermes had picked up a hatred of the sound of a woman crying, and he swung hastily out, wondering what the fuss was about There was only one person left, and he headed toward the little Missie Katherine's room.

She was asleep when he entered, but he called softly: "Miss Kitty." Her head popped up suddenly from the pillow and she groped for the light. For an eight-year-old child, she was lovely with the sleep still in her eyes. She gazed at the little white figure in faint astonishment.

Hermes shinnied up the leg of a chair and made a leap over onto the bed where he could watch her. "What happened to your father?" he asked.

She blinked at him with round eyes. "It talks—a little doll that talks! How cute!"

"I'm not a doll, Kitty. I'm Hermes."

"Not a doll? Oh, goody, you're an elf then?"

"Maybe." It was no time to bicker about a question that had no satisfactory answer. But his heart warmed toward the girl. She wasn't drunk, yet she could still believe in his existence. "I don't know just what I am, but I think I'm the smallest of the gods. Where's your father?"

Memory overwhelmed Kitty in a rush, and her brown eyes brimmed with tears. "He's in jail!" she answered through a puckered mouth. "A nasty man came and took him away, and Mamma feels awful. Just 'cause Mr. Hodges hates him."

"Where's jail? Never mind, I'll find out." It would save time by taking the information directly from her head, since she knew where it was. "Now go back to sleep and I'll go find your father."

"And bring him home to Mamma?"

"And bring him home to Mamma." Hermes knew practically nothing of jails, but the feeling of power was surging hotly through him. So far, everything he had attempted had been accomplished. Kitty smiled uncertainly at him and dropped her head back on the pillow. Then the little god's sense of vibration perception led him toward the cellar in search of certain vital bottles.

A child's toy truck, overburdened with a large bottle and a small god, drew up in front of the dirty white building that served as jail. Hermes had discovered the toy in the yard and used it as a boy does a wagon to facilitate travel. Now he stepped off, lifted the bottle, and parked the truck in a small shrub where he could find it again. Then he began the laborious job of hitching himself up the steps and into the building.

It was in the early morning hours, and there were few men about, but he stayed carefully in the shadow and moved only when their backs were turned. From his observation, men saw only what they expected, and the unusual attracted attention only when accompanied by some sudden sound or movement. Hermes searched one of the men's minds for the location of Brugh, then headed toward the cell, dragging the pint bottle behind him as noiselessly as he could.

Dr. Brugh sat on the hard iron cot with his head in his hands, somewhat after the fashion of Rodin's Thinker; but his face bore rather less of calm reflection. An occasional muttered invective reached the little god, who grinned. Arlington Brugh was a man of wide attainments, and he had not neglected the development of his vocabulary.

Hermes waited patiently until the guard was out of sight and slipped rapidly toward the cell, mounting over the bottom brace and through the bars. The scientist did not see him as he trotted under the bunk and found a convenient hiding place near the man's legs. At the moment, Brugh was considering the pleasant prospect of attaching all police to Bertha and bombarding them with .started with the key."

"Maybe I'd better take it from your head," Hermes decided. "That way I'll be less apt to miss things, and more sure to get things straight."

Brugh nodded and relaxed, thinking back over the last few hours. He lifted the bottle and extracted another drink, while Hermes followed the mental pictures and memory until the story was complete in his head.

"So that's the way it was," he grunted, finished. "Some of it doesn't make sense."

"None of it does. All I know is that I'm here and Hodges has enough trumped-up evidence to convict me. He wanted to make the charge kidnapping, but they suggested corpse stealing, and compromised on larceny—grand larceny, I guess."

"I still might be able to swipe the guard's keys and attract their attention—"

Brugh gathered his somewhat pickled senses. "No. Your biggest value to me is in your ability to get in places where a man couldn't, and find out things without anyone knowing it. If I get out, I can do no more than I can here—I'm not a detective when it comes to human reactions; just physical or chemical puzzles."

There was something in that, Hermes had to concede. "Then I'm to work outside?"

"If you want to. You're a free agent, not bound to me. Slaves have gone out of fashion, and you're hardly a robot." The physicist shook his head. "Why should you help me, come to think of it?"

"Because I want to grow up, and you might help me; and because in a sense, we both have the same memories and thought actions—I started out with a mixture of dog, cat, and you." He climbed off the bunk and scuttled across the floor. "I'll give Hodges your love if I see him."

Brugh grinned crookedly. "Do."

VIII

Professor Hiram Hodges stirred and turned over in his bed, a sense of something that wasn't as it should be troubling his mind. He grunted softly and tried to sleep again, but the premonition still bothered him. And then he realized that there was a rustling sound going on in his study and that it was still too early for his housekeeper.

He kicked off the sheet and rummaged under the bed for his slippers, drawing on the tattered old robe he'd worn for the last six years. As quietly as he could, he slipped across to the study door, threw it open, and snapped on the light switch, just as the rustling sound stopped. Probably his nephew up to some trick—

But the room contained neither a nephew nor any other man. Hodges blinked, adjusting his eyes to the light, and stared at his desk.

It had been closed when he went to bed, he was sure of that. Now it was open, and a litter of papers was strewn across it in haphazard fashion. Someone must have been there and disappeared in the split second it took to snap on the lights.

Hodges moved over to the desk, stopping to pick up a few scraps of paper that had fallen on the floor, then reached up to close the roll top. As he did so, something small and white made a sudden frantic lunge from among the papers and hit the floor to go scuttling across the room. With startlingly quick reactions for his age, the professor spun his lank frame and scooped up the scurrying object.

Apparently it was an animated rubber doll that lay twisting in his grasp. Words came spilling out, though the tiny mouth did not move. "All right, you've caught me. Do you have to squeeze me to death?"

Some men, when faced with the impossible, go insane; others refuse to believe. But Hodges' life had been spent in proving the impossible to be possible, and he faced the situation calmly. A robot wouldn't have spoken that way, and obviously this wasn't flesh and blood; equally obviously, it was some form of life. He lifted the figure onto the desk and clamped the wire wastebasket down over it.

"Now," he said, "what are you, where from, and what do you want?"

Hermes devoted full energy to picturing himself as a charging lion, but the professor was not impressed.

"It's a nice illusion," he granted, smiling. "Come to think of it, maybe your other shape isn't real. Which is it—my nephew or Brugh?"

Hermes gave up and went over the story of his creation again, point by point, while dawn crept up over the roofs of the adjacent houses and urged him to hurry. Hodges' first incredulity turned to doubt, and doubt gave place to half belief.

"So that's the way it is? All right. I'll believe you, provided you can explain how you see without the aid of a lens to direct the light against your sensory surface."

Hermes had overlooked that detail, and took time off to investigate himself. "Apparently the surface is sensitive only to light that strikes it at a certain angle," he decided. "And my mouth opening acts as a very rough lens—something on the order of the old pinhole camera. The tar below is curved, and if I want clearer vision, I can put out a thin bubble of fairly transparent surface material to rectify the light more fully, as a lens would. I don't need an iris."

"Ummm. So Brugh decided he'd made life and wanted to make a fool of me by bringing my man to consciousness, eh? Is that why he kidnapped Anthropos?"

Hermes grunted sourly. His mind was incapable of the sudden rages and dull hates that seemed to fill men's thoughts, but it was colored by the dislike Brugh had cultivated for the biochemist. "It's a nice way of lying, professor, but I know Dr. Brugh had nothing to do with your creation."

The other grinned skeptically. "How do you know?"

"I read his mind, where he had to reveal the truth." In proof, the little god transferred part of the picture he had drawn from Brugh's mind to that of Hodges.

"Hm-m-m." The biochemist lifted the wastebasket off and picked up the little figure. "That would account for the exposed film. Suppose you come with me while I get dressed and try reading my mind. You might be surprised."

Hermes was surprised, definitely. In the professor's mind there had been complete conviction of Brugh's guilt, shaken somewhat now by the story transferred by Hermes. Instead of being a cooked-up scheme to ruin his rival, the theft of the synthetic man was unquestionably genuine. The god fixed on one detail, trying to solve the riddle.

A note received the night before had first apprised the biochemist of the disappearance of his pet creation and sent him to the laboratory to investigate. "What happened to the ransom note?" Hermes asked.

Hodges was stuggling with man's symbol of slavery to the law of fashion, his necktie. "It's still in my pocket—here." He flipped it across the room, where the other could study the crude scrawl. The words were crude and direct:

> Perffeser , we got yur artifishul man itll cost you 1000$ to get him back leave the dough in a papre sack in the garbaj can bak of yur hows noon tomorer and dont cawl the bulls.

"Obviously the work of a well-educated man," Hodges grunted, succeeding finally with the tie. "They always try to appear too illiterate when writing those notes. That's why I thought Dr. Brugh wrote it to throw me off the trail."

"Hatred had nothing to do with it, I suppose?"

"I don't hate Brugh, and if his conscience didn't bother him, he wouldn't hate me. We used to be fairly good friends. We could still be if we weren't so darned stubborn." The professor grinned as he picked up the small figure and moved toward the kitchen. "You don't eat, do you? Well, I do.

Brugh played a dirty trick on me, but I've put over a few of them myself to get money for my department. At Gorton, it's always been dog eat dog when appropriations were under debate."

"But did you think he'd leave his key lying around for evidence?"

"People do funny things, and only the department heads are permitted master keys. It had his number." Hodges swallowed the last of a bun and washed it down with milk. "It is funny, though. Let's see, now. Brugh left the keys on the table; and sometime yesterday he lost one of them. Tanya was in the laboratory in the morning, just before a date with that confounded nephew of mine. Hm-m-m."

"But Tanya wouldn't—" Hermes felt duty bound to protect Tanya's reputation.

Hodges cut in on his protest. "It's plain you don't know Tanya Brugh. For herself, she wouldn't take it. But give her a fairly handsome young man with a smooth line, and she'd sell her own father down the river. That ransom note might be some of Johnny's pleasant work."

"Then you think it's your nephew?"

"I don't think anything, but it might be. He's the type. Tell you what I'll do; you try to get some of that potassium salt—oh, yes, I knew about it long ago—from your patron, and I'll help you investigate Johnny."

"If you'll help increase my size." That question was still a major one in the god's mind. "How'll we find out whether young Thomas has the thing?"

"That's your worry, son. I'll carry you there, but from then on, it's in your hands." Hodges pocketed Hermes and turned out of the kitchen.

IX

Johnny Thomas looked reasonably pleasant as he stuck his head out of the door, though the circles under his eyes were a little too prominent in the early morning hours. He grinned with evident self-satisfaction.

"Ah, my dear maternal uncle. Do come in." He kicked aside a newspaper that was scattered across the floor and flipped the cigarette ashes off the one comfortable chair in the room, seating himself on the bed. "What can I do for you this morning?"

Hodges coughed to cover the noise of Hermes slipping across the room to a dark place under the table. With that attended to, he faced his nephew. "You know Anthropos—that synthetic man I grew in a culture bath? Somebody stole him last night, tank and all, and slipped a note under my door demanding a thousand dollars for his return."

"Too bad. But surely, uncle, you don't think I had anything to do with it?"

"Of course not; how could you get into the laboratory? But I thought you might help me contact the man and make arrangements to pay. Of course, I'd be willing to let you have a few dollars for your work."

Thomas smiled, and looked across the room while apparently making up his mind. As he looked, a cat came out from where no cat should be, gravely lifted a bottle of whiskey, and drank deeply. "Excellent, my dear Thomas," the cat remarked. "I suppose when you collect that grand from your uncle, we'll have even better drinks. Smart trick, stealing that thing."

The cat licked its chops, sprouted wings, and turned into a fairy. "Naughty, naughty," said the fairy. "Little boys shouldn't steal." It fluttered over to Thomas' shoulder and perched there, tinkling reproachfully.

The young man swatted at it, felt his hand pass through it, and jumped for the chair. Now the room was empty, though his eyes darted into every corner. His uncle coughed again. "If you're done playing, John—" he suggested.

"Didn't you see it?"

"See what? Oh, you mean that fly? Yes, it was a big one. But about this business I have—"

"I think he'd make a nice meal," said a grizzly bear, materializing suddenly. "So young and succulent."

A shining halo of light quivered violently. "You'd poison your system, Bruin. Go back home." The bear obediently trotted to the window and passed through the glass; the halo of light struck a commanding note, and a face of wrath appeared in it. "Young man, repent of your ways and learn that your sins have found you out. Time is but short on this mortal sphere, and the bad that we do must follow us through all eternity. Repent, for the hour has come!"

Thomas quivered down onto the bed again, wiping his forehead. The idea of getting nervous at a time like this! The things couldn't be real. He turned back to Hodges, who was waiting patiently. "Just a little nervous this morning; not used to getting up so early. Now, as we were saying—"

Click! The sound was in the young man's head, and a soft purring voice followed it. "I know a secret, I know a secret, and I'm going to tell! Johnny, old kid, tell the old fossil what a smart guy you are, putting over a trick like that on him. Go ahead and tell!" There was a hot flicker of pain that stabbed up the backbone, then ran around the ribs and began doing something on the order of a toe dance in Thomas' stomach.

He gritted his teeth and groaned. Hodges became all solicitation. "Something you ate?" asked the professor. "Just lie down on the bed and relax."

There was a whole den of rattlesnakes curled up on the bed, making clicking sounds that seemed to say: "Come ahead, young fellow, it's breakfast time and we're hungry!" Thomas had no desire to relax among even imaginary snakes.

"Gulp—ugh!" he said, and an angel unscrewed its head from the light socket and dropped near him. "Gulp—ouch!" The angel sprouted horns and tail, and carried a red hot fork that felt most unpleasant when rubbed tenderly along his shins.

Click! Again the voice was in his head. "Remember that girl at Casey's? Well, when she committed suicide, it wasn't so nice. But that was gas, and she didn't feel any pains. When you commit suicide—"

"I won't commit suicide!" The bellow was involuntary, forced out just as the little devil decided his fork would feel worse in the stomach. "Take 'em away!"

Hodges clucked sympathetically. "Dear, dear! Do you have a dizzy feeling, Johnny?"

Johnny did, just as the words were out. His head gave an unpleasant twang and leaped from his body, then went whirling around the room. A gnome picked it up, whittled the neck quickly to a point, and drew a whip. "Hi, fellows!" called the gnome. "Come, see the top I made." He drew the whip smartly across Thomas' head and sent it spinning as a horde of other little hobgoblins jumped out of odd places to watch. That was a little too much for Johnny, with the addition of two worms that were eating his eyes.

Hodges chuckled. "All right, Hermes, let him alone. The boy's fainted. It's a pity I couldn't see the things you were forcing on his mind. Must have been right interesting."

Hermes came out of the corner, smiling. "They were very nice. I think he'll talk when he comes to. He persuaded Tanya to get him the key by pretending an interest in cyclotrons—said he was writing a story. She wouldn't have done it, except that the key was lying so temptingly within reach. He worked on her innocence."

"Okay, Hermes," Hodges grunted. "She's washed whiter than snow, if you want it that way. Better get back in my pocket; Johnny's coming around again."

It was noon when Hodges came to the cell where Brugh sat. The biochemist dropped the little god on the floor and grinned. “You’re free now, Arlington,” he informed the other. “Sorry I got you in here, but I’ve tried to make up for that.”

Brugh looked up at the professor’s voice, and his face wasn’t pretty. *“Arrughh!”* he said.

The smile on Hodges’ face remained unchanged. “I expected that. But Hermes here can tell you I honestly thought you’d stolen Anthropos. We just finished putting him back where he belongs, and seeing that young nephew of mine leave town. If you’ll avoid committing homicide on me, the warden will unlock the door.”

“What about my reputation?”

“Quite untouched,” Hermes assured him. “Professor Hodges succeeded in keeping everything hushed up, and it’s Sunday, so your absence from the university won’t mean anything.”

The physicist came out of the cell, and his shoulders lifted with the touch of freedom. The scowl on his face was gone, but uncertainty still remained in the look he gave Hodges.

The biochemist put out a hand. “I’ve been thinking you might help me on Anthropos,” he said. “You know, Arlington, we might make something out of that yet if we worked together.”

Brugh grinned suddenly. “We might at that, Hiram. Come on home to lunch, and we’ll talk it over while Hermes tells me what happened.”

Hermes squirmed as a hand lifted him back into the pocket. “How about helping me grow up?”

The two men were busy discussing other things. The height increase would have to wait.

X

Hermes sat on the edge of Anthropos’ tank, kicking his small legs against it and thinking of the last two days. To live in the same house, breathe the same air as Tanya Brugh! He dug up another sigh of ecstasy and followed it with one of despair.

For Tanya regarded him as some new form of bug, to be tolerated since he was useful, but not to be liked—an attitude shared by her mother. Dr. Brugh had the greatest respect for the little god, and Kitty was fond of him. Of them all, Kitty treated him best, and Tanya worst.

Of course, that was due to his height. John Thomas was gone, but there were still Will Young and her other escorts, none less than six feet in height. And Hermes was far from being tall. The consultation, held with Brugh and Hodges, had resulted in nothing; when all was said and done, there was no hope for him.

He sighed again, and Dixon, who was helping Hodges and Brugh with Anthropos, noticed him. "What's the matter, Hermes?" he asked good-naturedly. "Alcohol drying out again? Why not try carbon tetrachloride this time?"

Hermes shook his head. "I don't need anything. The alcohol seems to have permanently combined with the tar—something like water and a crystal, to form a hydrate. I'm softened thoroughly for all time."

Hodges looked up and then turned back to the tank where the synthetic man lay, and Hermes turned his attention to it. As far as outward appearance went, Anthropos was nearly perfect, and a tinge of envy filled the little god's thoughts.

Dixon wiped his forehead, "I give up. When three separate divisions of chemistry can't bring life to him, there's no hope. Hodges, your man is doomed to failure."

"He's breathing, though," the biochemist muttered. "Ever since we injected the potassium into him and put it in his nutritive bath, he's been living, but not conscious. See, his heartbeat is as regular as clockwork." He indicated the meter that flickered regularly on the tank.

Brugh refused to look. "To anyone but a biochemist," he informed the room, "the answer would be obvious. Hiram's created life, yes; but he can't give it a good brain. That's too complex for his electric cell formation determiner. What Anthropos needs is a new brain."

"I suppose you'd like to stick his head full of that gummy tar of yours?" Old habit made the words tart, though good fellowship had been restored between them.

"Why not?" It was Hermes' voice this time. Inspiration had flashed suddenly through his small mind, opening a mighty vista of marvels to his imagination. "Why wouldn't that solve it?"

"I'll bite. Why?" Dixon grinned, sweat rolling from his chubby face. "That's the best suggestion we've had today."

"But he wouldn't be real life then, not organic life. Besides, we can't be sure that another batch of the tar would live—it might be an accident that Hermes contained just the right ingredients. The rest of the tar probably isn't the same."

Hermes wriggled in his excitement. "Organic life is merely a chemico-electrical reaction, with radioactivity thrown in; and I'm all of that. What difference does it make?" He stretched out a small leg. "Dr. Brugh, will you examine my feet?"

With a puzzled frown, Brugh complied. "They're wearing out," he said. "The rubber is almost paper-thin. You'll need a new body soon, Hermes."

"Precisely. That's what I'm talking about. Why couldn't I be put in Anthropos' brainpan?"

Hodges let out a startled wail that died out and left his mouth hanging open. Finally he remembered to close it. "I wonder—" he muttered. "Would it work?"

Dixon demurred. "It'd be a delicate operation, removing the useless higher part of the brain and leaving the essential vital areas that control the heart and organs. Besides, could Hermes control the nerves?"

"Why not? He can control your nerves at a distance if he tries hard enough. But the operation would need a doctor's skill."

Hermes had that all figured out by now, and he voiced his plan while the others listened carefully. Hodges finally nodded. "It might work, son, and Anthropos isn't much good as is. I promised to help you grow up, and if you can use this body, it's yours. The university doesn't seem to value it much."

Later, the borrowed dissecting equipment from the zoology department was in readiness and the men stood looking on as Hermes prepared for his work. He paused at the brink of the tank. "You know what you're to do?"

"We do. After you open it, we'll lower your temperature until you harden up to unconsciousness, remove your casing, pack you in the brainpan, so there's no danger of nerve pressure, and cover the opening with the removed section of the skull."

"Right. In that nutrient fluid, it should heal completely in a few hours." Hermes dropped into the tank and was immersed in the liquid; his ability to work in any medium facilitated the operation.

And his sense of perception made him capable of performing the work with almost uncanny skill. As the others watched, he cut briskly around the skull, removed a section, and went into the brain, analyzing it almost cell by cell and suturing, cutting, and scraping away the useless tissue.

Blood oozed out slowly, but the liquid's restorative power began functioning, healing the soft nerve tissue almost as rapidly as it was cut. Hermes nodded approval and continued until only the vital centers that functioned properly were left. Then he indicated that he was finished and Hodges pulled him out.

The dry ice was numbing as they packed it around him, and his thoughts began moving more sluggishly. But as consciousness left him, a heady exultation was singing its song through every atom of his being. He would be tall and handsome, and Tanya would love him.

Consciousness faded as Hodges began the relatively simple job of removing his casing and inserting him into the vacancy in Anthropos' head.

XI

Darkness. That was the first thought Hermes felt on regaining consciousness. He was in a cave with no entrance, and light could not stream through. Around him was a warm shell that held him away from direct contact with the world. He started to struggle against it, and the uneasy sense of closeness increased.

Then he remembered he was in the head of the synthetic man. He must open his eyes and look out. But his eyes refused to open. Again he concentrated, and nothing seemed to happen.

Brugh's voice, muffled as from a great distance, reached him. "Well, he's awake. His big toe twitched then." There was another sensation, the feeling of faint current pouring in from one of the nerve endings, and Hermes realized that must be his ears sending their message to his brain.

This time he tried to talk, and Hodges spoke. "That was his leg moving. I wonder if he can control his body." Hermes was learning; the sound and nerve messages co-ordinated this time. Learning to use Anthropos' auditory system would not be too difficult.

But he was having trouble. He had tried to open his eyes, and a toe had twitched; an effort to use his tongue resulted in a leg moving. There was only one thing to do, and that was to try everything until the desired result was obtained.

It was several minutes later when Dixon's voice registered on his nerves: "See, his eyes are open. Can you see, Hermes—or Anthropos?"

Hermes couldn't. There was a wild chaos of sensation pouring in through the optic nerve, which must be the effect of light, but it made little sense to him. He concentrated on one part that seemed to register less strongly, and succeeded in making out the distorted figure of a man. It was enough to begin with, but learning to use his eyes took more time than the ears had.

He gave up trying to speak and sent his thought out directly to Brugh.

"Lift me out and move me around, so that I can study which sensations are related to my various parts."

Brugh obeyed promptly with the help of the others, enthusiasm running high. Hermes had the entire job of learning to make his body behave before him, but he brought a highly developed mind to bear on the problem. Bit by bit, the sensation sent up by the nerves registered on his brain, was cataloged and analyzed, and became a familiar thing to him. He tried touching a table with his finger, and made it in two attempts.

"You'll be better than any man when we're done with you," Hodges gloated. "If I'd brought consciousness into Anthropos, I'd still have had to educate him as a child is taught. You can learn by yourself."

Hermes was learning to talk again, in the clumsy system of breathing, throat contraction, and oral adaptation that produces human words. He tried it now. "Let me walk alone."

Another half hour saw a stalwart young figure striding about the laboratory, examining this and that, trying out implements, using his body in every way that he could. It answered his commands with a smooth coordination that pleased them all.

Brugh was elated. "With a brain like that, Hermes, and the body you have now, we could make the world's greatest physical chemist out of you. A little wire pulling and a few tricks, examinations, and things, and you'd have your degree in no time. I could use you here."

"He'd be a wonderful biochemist," Hodges cut in. "Think of what that sense of perception would mean to us in trying to determine the effects of drugs on an organism."

Dixon added his opinion. "As an organic chemist, think what it would mean in analyzing and synthesizing new compounds. But why not all three? What we really need is someone to co-ordinate the various fields, and Hermes is ideal." He held out an old pair of trousers, acid-stained, but whole, and Hermes began climbing into them. That was a complication he hadn't thought of, and one which was not entirely pleasant. He saw no reason to conceal the new body of which he was so proud.

Brugh had accepted Dixon's idea. "How about getting yourself added to our staff in a few years? It would mean a lot to science, and the board of directors couldn't refuse the appointment if you'd force a little thought into their empty heads."

Hermes had been considering it, and the prospect appealed to him. But Tanya wouldn't like it, probably. He'd have to see her before he could make any decisions. Of course, now that he was a real man instead of a rubber statue, she couldn't refuse him.

There was an interruption from the door, a small child's voice. "Daddy, Daddy, are you there?" The door swung open and Kitty Brugh came tripping in.

"Kitty, you don't belong here." Brugh faced her with a scowl of annoyance. "I'm busy."

"But Mamma sent me." Her voice was plaintive. "She gave me this telegram to bring to you."

Brugh took it and read it through, his face lighting up. "Great luck," he told Hermes, handing it over. "I never thought Tanya would choose so well."

The telegram was as simple as most telegrams are:

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HAVE MARRIED WILL YOUNG AND ON HONEYMOON IN
MILLSBURG STOP EVER SO HAPPY STOP LOVE
                                       TANYA
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And with it, the newly created man's hopes went flying out into nothingness.

But somehow he felt much better than he should. He handed it back to Brugh, and the sigh he achieved was halfhearted. Kitty's eyes noticed him for the first time.

She squeaked delightedly. "Oh, what a pretty man! What's your name?"

Hermes' heart went out to her. He stooped and picked her up in his strong young arms, stroking her hair. "I'm the little god, Kitty. I'm your Hermes in a new body. Do you like it?"

She snuggled up. "Um-hmm. It's nice." There was no surprise for her in anything Hermes might do. He turned back to the three men then.

"Dr. Brugh, I've decided to accept your offer. I'd like nothing better than working with all of you here at Gorton."

"Splendid, my boy. Splendid. Eh, Hiram?"

They crowded around him, shaking his hand, and he thoroughly enjoyed the flattery of their respect. But most of his thoughts were centered on Kitty. After all, she was the only woman—or girl—who had treated him with any consideration, and her little mind was open and honest. She'd make a wonderful woman in ten more years.

Ten more years; and he wasn't so very old himself. There might be hope there yet.

Cross of Fire

That rain! Will it never stop? My clothes are soaked, my body frozen. But at least the lightning is gone. Strange; I haven't seen it since I awoke. There was lightning, I think. I can't seem to remember anything clearly, yet I am sure there was a fork of light in the sky; no, not a fork; it was like a cross.

That's silly, of course. Lightning can't form a cross. It must have been a dream while I was lying there in the mud. I don't recall how I came there, either. Perhaps I was ambushed and robbed, then left lying there until the rain brought me to. But my head doesn't hurt; the pain is in my shoulder, a sharp, jabbing ache. No, I couldn't have been robbed; I still have my ring, and there is money in my pocket. I wish I could remember what happened. When I try to think, my brain refuses. There is some part of it that doesn't want to remember. Now why should that be? There…No, it's gone again. It must have been another dream; it had to be. Horrible!

Now I must find shelter from the rain. I'll make a fire when I get home and stop trying to think until my mind is rested. Ah, I know where home is. This can't be so terrible if I know that…

There, I have made a fire and my clothes are drying before it. I was right; this is my home. And I'm Karl Hahrhöffer. Tomorrow I'll ask in the village how I came here. The people in Altdorf are my friends. Altdorf! When I am not trying to think, things come back a little. Yes, I'll go to the village tomorrow. I'll need food, anyway, and there are no provisions in the house.

But that is not strange. When I arrived here, it was boarded and nailed shut, and I spent nearly an hour trying to get in. Then my feet guided me to the cellar, and it was not locked. My muscles some times know better than my brain. And sometimes they trick me. They would have led me deeper into the cellar instead of up the steps to this room.

Dust and dirt are everywhere, and the furniture seems about to fall apart. One might think no one had lived here for a century. Perhaps I have been away from Altdorf a long time, but surely I can't have lived away while all this happened. I must find a mirror. There should be one over there, but it's gone; no matter, a tin pan of water will serve.

Not a mirror in the house? I used to like my reflection, and found my face fine and aristocratic. I've changed. My face is but little older, but the eyes are hard, the lips thin and red, and there is something unpleasant about my expression. When I smile, the muscles twist crookedly before they attempt my old cockiness. Sister Flämchen used to love my smile.

There is a bright red wound on my shoulder, like a burn. It must have been the lightning, after all. Perhaps it was that cross of fire in the sky I seem to remember. It shocked my brain badly, then left me on the soggy earth until the cold revived me.

But that does not explain the condition of the house, nor where old Fritz has gone. Flämchen may have married and gone away, but Fritz would have stayed with me. I may have taken him to America with me, but what became of him then? Yes, I was going to America before…before something happened. I must have gone and been away longer than I look to have been. In ten years much might happen to a deserted house. And Fritz was old. Did I bury him in America?

They may know in Altdorf. The rain has stopped and there is a flush of dawn in the sky. I'll go down soon. But now I am growing sleepy. Small wonder, with all I have been through. I'll go upstairs and sleep for a little while before going to the village. The sun will be up in a few minutes.

No, fool legs, to the left! The right leads back to the cellar, not the bedroom. Up! The bed may not be the best now, but the linens should have kept well, and I should be able to sleep there. I can hardly keep my eyes open long enough to reach it…

I must have been more tired than I thought, since it's dark again. Extreme fatigue always brings nightmares, too. They've faded out, as dreams do, but they must have been rather gruesome, from the impression left behind. And I woke up ravenously hungry.

It is good that my pockets are well filled with money. It would take a long time to go to Edeldorf where the bank is. Now it won't be necessary for some time. This money seems odd, but I suppose the coinage has changed while I was gone. How long have I been away? The air is cool and sweet after yesterday's rain, but the moon is hidden. I've picked up an aversion to cloudy nights. And something seems wrong with the road to the village. Of course it would change, but it seems to have been an unusually great change for ten years or so.

Ah, Altdorf! Where the Burgermeister's house was, there is now some shop with a queer pump in front of it—gasoline. Much that I cannot recall ever seeing before, my mind seems to recognize, even to expect. Changes all around me, yet Altdorf has not changed as greatly as I feared. There is the tavern, beyond is the food store, and down the street is the wine shop. Excellent!

No, I was wrong; Altdorf has not changed, but the people have. I don't recognize any of them, and they stare at me most unpleasantly. They should be my friends; the children should run after me for sweets. Why should they fear me? Why should that old woman cry out and draw her children into the house as I pass? Why are the lights turned out as I approach and the streets deserted? Could I have become a criminal in America? I had no leaning toward crime. They must mistake me for someone else; I do look greatly different.

The storekeeper seems familiar, but younger and altered in subtle ways from the one I remember. A brother, perhaps. "Don't run away, you fool I won't hurt you. I wish only to purchase some vegetables and provisions. Let me see—no, no beef. I am no robber, I will pay you. See, I have money."

His face is white, his hands tremble. Why does he stare at me when I order such common things? "For myself, of course. For whom else should I buy these? My larder is empty. Yes, that will do nicely."

If he would stop shaking; must he look back to that door so furtively? Now his back is turned, and his hands grope up as if he were crossing himself. Does he think one sells one's soul to the devil by going to America?

"No, not that, storekeeper. Its color is the most nauseating red I have seen. And some coffee and cream, some sugar, some—yes, some liverwurst and some of that brown sausage, but not too lean—I want only the fat. Blutwurst? No, never. What a thought! Yes, I'll take it myself, if your boy is sick. It is a long walk to my place. If you'll lend me that wagon, I'll return it tomorrow....All right, I'll buy it.

"How much? No, of course I'll pay. This should cover it, if you won't name a price. Do I have to throw it at you? Here, I'll leave it on the counter. Yes, you can go."

Now why should the fool scuttle off as if I had the plague? That might be it. They would avoid me, of course, if I had had some contagious disease. Yet surely I couldn't have returned here alone, if I had been sick. No, that doesn't explain it.

Now the wine-dealer. He is a young man, very self-satisfied. Perhaps he will act sensibly. At least he doesn't run, though his skin blanches. "Yes, some wine."

He isn't surprised as much as the storekeeper; wine seems a more normal request than groceries, it would appear. Odd. "No, white Riesling, not the red. And some of the tokay. Yes, that brand will do if you don't have the other. And a little cognac. These evenings are so cool. Your money…Very well."

He doesn't refuse the money, nor hesitate to charge double for his goods. But he picks it up with a hesitant gesture and then dumps the change into my hand without counting it out. There must be something in my looks that the water did not reveal last night. He stands staring at me so fixedly as I draw my wagon away. Next time I shall buy a good mirror, but I have had enough of this village for the time…

Night again. This morning I lay down before sunrise, expecting to catch a little sleep before exploring the house, but again it was dark before I awoke. Well, I have candles enough; it makes little difference whether I explore the place by day or night.

Hungry as I am, it seems an effort to swallow the food, and the taste is odd and unfamiliar, as if I had eaten none of it for a long time. But then, naturally the foods in America would not be the same. I am beginning to believe that I was away longer than I thought. The wine is good, though. It courses through my veins like new life.

And the wine dispels the lurking queerness of the nightmares. I had hoped that my sleep would be dreamless, but they came again, this time stronger. Some I half remember. Flämchen was in one, Fritz in several.

That is due to my being back in the old house. And because the house has changed so unpleasantly, Fritz and Flämchen have altered into the horrible travesties I see in my dreams.

Now to look over the house. First the attic, then the cellar. The rest of it I have seen, and it is little different except for its anachronistic appearance of age. Probably the attic will be the same, though curiosity and idleness urge me to see.

These stairs must be fixed; the ladder looks too shaky to risk. It seems solid enough, though. Now the trapdoor—ah, it opens easily. But what is that odor? Garlic—or the age-worn ghost of garlic. The place reeks of it; there are little withered bunches of it tied everywhere.

Someone must have lived up here once—There is a bed and a table, with a few soiled dishes. That refuse might have been food once. And that old hat was one that Fritz always wore. The cross on the wall and the Bible on the table were Flämchen's. My sister and Fritz must have shut themselves up here after I was gone. More mysteries. If that is true, they may have died here. The villagers must know of them. Perhaps there is one who will tell me. The wine-dealer might, for a price.

There is little to hold me here, unless the table drawer has secrets it will surrender. Stuck! The rust and rotten wood cannot be wrong. I must have been away more years than I thought. Ah, there it comes. Yes, there is something here, a book of some sort—*Diary of Fritz August Schmidt.* This should give me a clue, if I can break the clasp. There should be tools in the workroom.

But first I must explore the cellar. It seems strange that the doors should have been open there when all the rest were so carefully nailed shut. If I could only remember how long I've been gone!

How easily my feet lead me down into the cellar! Well, let them have their way this once. Perhaps they know more than my memory tells. They guided me here well enough before. Tracks in the dust! A man's shoe print. Wait…Yes, they match perfectly; they are mine. Then I came down here before the shock—Ah, that explains the door. I came here, opened that, and walked about. Probably I was on my way to the village when the storm came up. Yes, that must be it. And that explains why my legs moved so surely to the cellar entrance. Muscular habits are hard to break.

But why should I have stayed here so long? The tracks go in all directions, and they cover the floor, Surely there is nothing to hold my interest here. The walls are bare shelves crumbling to pieces, and not a sign of anything unusual anywhere. No, there is something; that board shouldn't be loose, where the tracks all meet again. How easily it comes away in my hand!

Now why should there be a pit dug out behind the wall, when the cellar is still empty? Perhaps something is hidden here. The air is moldy and sickening inside. Somewhere I've smelled it before, and the association is not pleasant. Ah, now I can see. There's a box there, a large one, and heavy. Inside…A coffin, open and empty!

Someone buried here? But that is senseless; it is empty. Too, the earth would have been filled in. No, there is something wrong here. Strange things have gone on in this house while I have been away. The house is too old, the villagers fear me, Fritz shuts himself up in the attic, this coffin is hidden here; somehow they must be connected. And I must find the connection.

This was an unusually fine coffin once; the satin lining is still scarcely soiled, except for those odd brown blotches. Mold, perhaps, though I've never seen it harden the cloth before; it looks more like blood. Evidently I'll not find my connection here. But there still remains the diary. Somewhere there has to be an answer. I'll break the clasp at once, and see if my questions are settled there…

This time, reading and work have given me no chance to sleep through the day as before. It is almost night again, and I am still awake.

Yes, the diary held the answer. I have burned it now, but I could recite it from memory. Memory! How I hate that word! Mercifully, some things are still only half clear; my hope now is that I may never remember fully. How I have remained sane this long is a miracle beyond comprehension. If I had not found the diary, things might…but better this way.

The story is complete now. At first as I read Fritz's scrawl it was all strange and unbelievable; but the names and events jogged my memory until I was living again the nightmare I read. I should have guessed before. The sleeping by day, the age of the house, the lack of mirrors, the action of the villagers, my appearance—a hundred things—all should have told me what I had been. The story is told all too clearly by the words Fritz wrote before he left the attic.

My plans had been made, and I was to leave for America in three days when I met a stranger the villagers called the "Night Lady." Evil things had been whispered of her, and they feared and despised her, but I would have none of their superstition. For me she had an uncanny fascination. My journey was forgotten, and I was seen with her at night until even my priest turned against me. Only Fritz and Flämchen stayed with me.

When I "died," the doctors called it anemia, but the villagers knew better. They banded together and hunted until they found the body of the woman. On her they used a hartshorn stake and fire. But my coffin had been moved; though they knew I had become a monster, they could not find my body.

Fritz knew what would happen. The old servant sealed himself and Flämchen in the attic away from me. He could not give up hopes for me, though. He had a theory of his own about the Undead. "It is not death," he wrote, "but a possession. The true soul sleeps, while the demon who has entered the body rules instead. There must be some way to drive out the fiend without killing the real person, as our Lord did to the man possessed. Somehow, I must find the method."

That was before I returned and lured Flämchen to me. Why is it that we—such as I was become—must prey always on those whom we loved? Is it not enough to lie writhing in the hell the usurper has made of our body without the added agonies of seeing one's friends its victims?

When Flämchen joined me in Undeath, Fritz came down from his retreat. He came willingly if not happily to join us. Such loyalty deserved a better reward. Wretched Flämchen, miserable Fritz!

They came here last night, but it was almost dawn, and they had to go back. Poor, lustful faces, pressed against the broken windows, calling me to them! Since they have found me, they will surely be back. It is night again, and they should be here any moment now. Let them come. My preparations are made, and I am ready. We have stayed together before, and will vanish together tonight.

A torch is lit and within reach, and the dry old floor is covered with rags and oil to fire the place. On the table I have a gun loaded with three bullets. Two of them are of silver, and on each a cross is cut deeply. If Fritz were right, only such bullets may kill a vampire, and in all other things he has proved correct.

Once I, too, should have needed the argent metal, but now this simple bit of lead will serve as well. Fritz's theory was correct.

That cross of lightning, which drove away the demon possessing my body, brought my real soul back to life; once a vampire, again I became a man. But almost I should prefer the curse to the memories it has left.

Ah, they have returned. They are tapping at the door I have unfastened, moaning their bloodlust as of old.

"Come in, come in. It is not locked. See, I am ready for you. No, don't draw back from the gun. Fritz, Flämchen, you should welcome this..."

How peaceful they look now! Real death is so clean. But I'll drop the torch on the tinder, to make doubly sure. Fire is the cleanest of all things. Then I shall join them...This gun against my heart seems like an old friend; the pull of the trigger is like a soft caress. Strange. The pistol flame looks like a cross...Flämchen...the cross...so clean!

Absolutely No Paradox

The old men's section of the Arts and Science Club was always the best ordered. The robots somehow managed to avoid clanking there; the greensward beyond the veranda was always just right, and the drinks were the best for six counties. Old Ned Brussels touched his glass to his lips appreciatively, sighed in contentment, and waited for some of the other oldsters to break the silence.

Finally, Lem Hardy took the plunge. "He did it," he announced, referring to a conversation of weeks before. Then, at their puzzled looks, he amplified. "My grandson, damn it! He's got a time machine—it works. Sent a cat four days up, and it came through unharmed."

The glass fell from Old Ned's hand, bouncing on the floor, and spilling good liquor. A robot came forward silently to clean it up, but Ned didn't look at it. "Four days doesn't mean a thing. Lem—is that kid planning on trying it out?"

"He's going to try it next week."

"Then for the Lord's sake, stop him! Look, does it work like this?" His fingers slipped over the pencil smoothly, as they had always done when he worked, drafting robot bodies in the old days. A rude schematic seemed to grow almost instantly on the paper.

Lem took it, then stiffened suddenly. "Who told you?"

"A youngster named Pete LeFranc—and it was forty years…no, over fifty years ago. Lem, if you like your grandson, keep him out of the machine. Four days, four weeks—they don't mean anything. Time machines don't work, however well they seem to."

A bustle from behind them pulled their eyes around. One of the robots was quietly restraining a nervous young man who was trying to break free and join the group. His face was tense, excited, with an odd bitter fear behind it. His words were seemingly cut out of steel. "…told me I'd find him here. Damn it…"

"Sorry, sir. You'll have to wait." The robot's voice was adamant under its smoothness.

Ned grunted, and then impulse led him to look again. He'd seen the man somewhere. He hunted for it, then dismissed it, knowing that his memory was tricky these days. But he motioned the robot aside. "We don't allow interruptions for junior members," he told the man, letting his voice soften the words. "Still, if you want to sit down and listen—quietly—nobody'll stop you."

"But…"

"Quietly!" The robot stressed the word. The man looked at it, then swiveled to Ned Brussels. For a moment, the bitterness halted, as if frozen, then gave place to a sudden sharp amusement. His eyes searched Ned's, and he nodded, dropping into a chair.

Lem took up the conversation again. "It worked. And if it works for four days, it should work for four centuries. You're just scared of paradoxes, Ned—going back and killing your grandfather, or such rot. You've been reading too many stories on it."

"Fifty years ago, Pete LeFranc said the same thing. Young man, either sit down, or get out! This is the Old Men's section! He had answers for all the paradoxes, too—except one question."

Ned had been young, then, just getting started at synthanatomy drafting, and not rich enough for wine of the type Pete always kept. He sipped it with relish, and looked at the odd cage Pete was displaying. "All the same, it won't work!"

Pete laughed. "Reality doesn't mean a thing to an artist, does it? Be damned to your paradoxes—there's some answer to them. It did work; the dog appeared exactly four weeks later, just finishing his bark!"

"Then why haven't time machines come back from the future?" Ned shot at him. He's been saving that as his final argument, and he sat back to watch the bomb explode.

For a second, Pete blinked. "You never figured that out yourself."

"Nope. I got it from a science fiction story. But why haven't they? If yours works, there'll be more time machines built. With more built, they'll be improved. They'll get to be commonplace. People'd use them—and someone would turn up here with one. Or in the past. Why haven't we met time travelers, Pete?"

"Maybe we have met them, but didn't know it?"

"Nonsense. You get in that machine and go back to Elizabethan England. Try to pass yourself off as being native to that time even an hour. No, there'd be slip-ups."

Pete considered it, pouring more wine. "An idea—but you're right, maybe. I haven't tried going back—if I'd sent the dog backwards, I couldn't have checked up on it, while I could be waiting in the future. Okay, you've convinced me."

"Then you're not going in the contraption."

Pete's laughter was spontaneous and loaded with amusement. "I'm going forward and find out why no one has come back! I've got a nice collection of rare coins I can trade off up there—should be more valuable—and I'll bring you back a working invention from the next century. With luck, I'll bring you the answer. And after that, maybe I can go back and kill an ancestor, just to see what happens."

"Don't be a fool!"

But Pete was grinning, and opening the door to the cage that rested in the middle of his laboratory. "Fifty years this trip," he said, spinning the dials. "And you won't have long to wait; I'll come back just about in no time."

Ned started to yell something, but there was a curious flicker, such as he'd seen when Pete sent the dog forward. The time machine blurred over, its surface seeming to stretch into infinity while contracting to nothing at the same time.

Then it was gone. Ned groped for the wine bottle, cursing, and drained the contents. Then he sat down to wait.

Three days later, the police came looking for Pete, on some mysterious tip, probably from a fellow worker. It was a pretty rough time, for a while, though they finally decided it was just another mystery, and that Ned's yarn of having been there only to keep an appointment was true. Ned had influential friends, even if he didn't have money, then.

For three years, he rented Pete's laboratory, before he made enough to buy it. For a decade, he lived in it; but by then he'd begun to know Pete wasn't coming back.

"The building's still there," Old Ned finished.

"The diagrams of his machine are still in the drawers. But Pete never showed up. I tell you, keep your fool grandson out of time machines, Lem. They don't work. Too many paradoxes—if they'd work, you could steal a future invention, get credit for inventing it, and nobody would ever have to invent it. When things have that many angles that can't work, the thing itself can't work."

Lem shook his head stubbornly. "It worked; the kid got the cat back. Something just happened to your friend—maybe his power failed."

"Then he wouldn't have gotten all the way—and he'd have reappeared years ago. Pete measured things—and there was no displacement in space. If something had happened to him, the machine would have been there, anyhow. Besides, I had alarms wired to call the police in—told 'em it was to protect a safe—the minute he showed up. He never showed up; he never came back."

"So I suppose he just disappeared—time ate him up?" Lem's stubbornness was cracking a bit, though. His voice was higher than even an old man's should be.

"I don't know. But time machines don't work. Otherwise where are the time travelers from the future?"

They sat quietly for a second. Ned was remembering the years, up to the time he'd given up, disconnected the alarms, and come here to the Arts and Science Club to live. He'd been stubborn, maybe—a little bit—but Pete hadn't reappeared.

Behind him, the young man cleared his throat, and the robot moved forward. But there was no rule against intrusion when no one was speaking, and the robot came to a stop. Ned looked back, just as the man decided the robot wouldn't interfere. There was more amusement on the man's face now, but the bitterness still lay there.

He grinned at Ned, a familiar grin, and his voice was flat and positive. "Time machines work. And there are no paradoxes—absolutely no paradoxes!"

Lem stirred, craning back, and Ned bristled. But something about the younger man caught back the words, as he picked up the thin thread of memory.

The other grinned again, wryly. "It's simple. Time machines work in one direction—they can't go back. Your time traveler found that out too late. No trips to the past, no return from the future—and no paradoxes, Ned Brussels."

He came to his feet, moving over to drop into the chair beside Ned. The older man nodded, stretching out his hand.

"I told you not to try the damned machine, Pete," Ned told him. Then he chuckled as the oldest cliché among old friends meeting again came to his lips. "Fifty years—and you haven't changed a bit, Pete LeFranc!"

Dead Ringer
[And the Truth...]

Dane Phillips slouched in the window seat, watching the morning crowds on their way to work and carefully avoiding any attempt to read Jordan's old face as the editor skimmed through the notes. He had learned to make his tall, bony body seem all loose-jointed relaxation, no matter what he felt. But the oversized hands in his pockets were clenched so tightly that the nails were cutting into his palms.

Every tick of the old-fashioned clock sent a throb racing through his brain. Every rustle of the pages seemed to release a fresh shot of adrenaline into his blood stream. This time, his mind was pleading. It has to be right this time…

Jordan finished his reading and shoved the folder back. He reached for his pipe, sighed, and then nodded slowly. "A nice job of researching, Phillips. And it might make a good feature for the Sunday section, at that."

It took a second to realize that the words meant acceptance, for Phillips had prepared himself too thoroughly against another failure. Now he felt the tautened muscles release, so quickly that he would have fallen if he hadn't been braced against the seat.

He groped in his mind, hunting for words, and finding none. There was only the hot, sudden flame of unbelieving hope. And then an almost blinding exultation.

Jordan didn't seem to notice his silence. The editor made a neat pile of the notes, nodding again. "Sure. I like it. We've been short of shock stuff lately and the readers go for it when we can get a fresh angle. But naturally you'd have to leave out all that nonsense on Blanding. Hell, the man's just buried, and his relatives and friends…"

"But that's the proof!" Phillips stared at the other, trying to penetrate through the haze of hope that was somehow suddenly chilled and unreal. His thoughts were abruptly disorganized and out of his control. Only the urgency remained. "It's the key evidence. And we've got to move fast! I don't know how long it takes, but even one more day may be too late!"

Jordan nearly dropped the pipe from his lips as he jerked upright to peer sharply at the younger man. "Are you crazy? Do you seriously expect me to get an order to exhume him now? What would it get us, other than lawsuits? Even if we could get the order without cause—which we can't!"

Then the pipe did fall, as he stared open-mouthed. "My God, you believe all that stuff. You expected us to publish it *straight!*"

"No," Dane said thickly. The hope was gone now, as if it had never existed, leaving a numb emptiness where nothing mattered. "No, I guess I didn't really expect anything. But I believe the facts. Why shouldn't I?" He reached for the papers with hands he could hardly control and began stuffing them back into the folder. All the careful documentation, the fingerprints—smudged perhaps, in some cases, but still evidence enough for anyone but a fool—

"Phillips?" Jordan asked, and now his voice was taking on a new edge. "*Phillips!* Wait a minute, I've got it now! Dane Phillips, not Arthur! Two years on the *Trib*. Then you turned up on the *Register* in Seattle? Phillip Dean, or some such name, there."

"Yeah," Dane agreed. There was no use in denying anything now. "Yeah, Dane Arthur Phillips. So I suppose I'm through here?"

Jordan nodded again, and there was a faint edge of fear in his voice. "You can pick up your pay on the way out. And make it quick, before I change my mind and call the boys in white!"

It could have been worse. It had been worse, before. And there was enough in the pay envelope to buy what he needed. A flash camera, a little folding shovel from one of the surplus houses, and a bottle of good Scotch. It would be a long wait until it was dark enough for him to taxi out to Oakhaven Cemetery where Blanding had been buried.

It wouldn't change the minds of the fools, of course. Even if he could drag what he might find, without the change being completed, they wouldn't accept the evidence. He'd been crazy to think anything could change their minds. And they called him a fanatic! If the facts he'd dug up in ten years of hunting wouldn't convince them nothing would. And yet, he had to see for himself, before it was too late!

He picked a cheap hotel at random and checked in under an assumed name. He couldn't go back to his room while there was a chance Jordan still might try to turn him in. There wouldn't be time for Sylvia's detectives to bother him, probably, but there was the ever-present danger that one of the aliens might get the message.

He shivered. He'd been risking that for ten years, yet the possibility was still a horror to him. The uncertainty made it harder to take than any human-devised torture could be. There was no way of guessing what an alien might do to anyone who discovered that all men were not human…

There was the classic syllogism: *All men are mortal; I am a man; therefore, I am mortal.* But not Blanding—or Corporal Harding!

It was Harding's "death" that had started it all during the fighting on Guadalcanal. A grenade had come flying into the foxhole where Dane and Harding had felt reasonably safe. The concussion had knocked Dane out—probably saving his life when the enemy thought he was dead. He'd come to in the daylight to see Harding lying there, mangled and twisted, with his throat torn out. There was blood on Dane's uniform, obviously spattered from the dead man. It hadn't been a mistake or delusion; Harding had been dead.

It had taken Dane two days of crawling and hiding to get back to his group, too exhausted to report Harding's death. He'd slept for twenty hours. And when he awoke, Harding had been standing beside him, with a whole throat and a fresh uniform, grinning and kidding him for running off and leaving a stunned friend behind. It was no ringer, but Harding himself, complete to the smallest personal memories and personality traits.

The pressures of war probably saved Dane's sanity while he learned to face the facts. All men are mortal; Harding is not mortal; therefore, Harding is not a man! Nor was Harding alone—Dane found enough evidence to know there were others.

The *Tribune* morgue yielded even more data. A man had faced seven firing squads and walked away. Another survived over a dozen attacks by professional killers. Fingerprints turned up mysteriously "copied" from those of men long dead. Some of the aliens seemed to heal almost instantly; others took days. Some operated completely alone; some seemed to have joined with others. But they were legion.

Lack of a clearer pattern of attack made him consider the possibility of human mutation, but such tissue was too wildly different, and the invasion had begun long before atomics or X-rays. He gave up trying to understand their alien motivations. It was enough that they existed in secret, slowly growing in numbers while mankind was unaware of them.

When his proof was complete and irrefutable, he took it to his editor—to be fired, politely but coldly. Other editors were less polite. But he went on doggedly trying and failing. What else could he do? Somehow, he had to find the few people who could recognize facts and warn them. The aliens would get him, of course, when the story broke, but a warned humanity could cope with them. Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.

Then he met Sylvia by accident after losing his fifth job—a girl who had inherited a fortune big enough to spread his message in paid ads across the country. They were married before he found she was hardheaded about her money. She demanded a full explanation for every cent beyond his allowance. In the end, she got the explanation. And while he was trying to cash the check she gave him, she visited Dr. Buehl, to come back with a squad of quiet, refined strong-arm boys who made sure Dane reached Buehl's "rest home" safely.

Hydrotherapy…Buehl as the kindly firm father image…analysis…hypnosis that stripped every secret from him, including his worst childhood nightmare.

His father had committed a violent, bloody suicide after one of the many quarrels with Dane's mother. Dane had found the body.

Two nights after the funeral, he had dreamed of his father's face, horror-filled, at the window. He knew now that it was a normal nightmare, caused by being forced to look at the face in the coffin, but the shock had lasted for years. It had bothered him again, after his discovery of the aliens, until a thorough check had proved without doubt that his father had been fully human, with a human, if tempestuous, childhood behind him.

Dr. Buehl was delighted. "You see, Dane? You know it was a nightmare, but you don't really believe it even now. Your father was an alien monster to you—no adult is quite human to a child. And that literal-minded self, your subconscious, saw him after he died. So there are alien monsters who return from death. Then you come to from a concussion. Harding is sprawled out unconscious, covered with blood—probably your blood, since you say he wasn't wounded, later.

"But after seeing your father, you can't associate blood with yourself—you see it as a horrible wound on Harding. When he turns out to be alive, you're still in partial shock, with your subconscious dominant. And that has the answer already. There are monsters who come back from the dead! An exaggerated reaction, but nothing really abnormal. We'll have you out of here in no time."

No non-directive psychiatry for Buehl. The man beamed paternally, chuckling as he added what he must have considered the clincher. "Anyhow, even zombies can't stand fire, Dane, so you can stop worrying about Harding. I checked up on him. He was burned to a crisp in a hotel fire two months ago."

It was logical enough to shake Dane's faith, until he came across Milo Blanding's picture in a magazine article on society in St. Louis. According to the item, Milo was a cousin of the Blandings, whose father had vanished in Chile as a young man, and who had just rejoined the family. The picture was of Harding!

An alien could have gotten away by simply committing suicide and being carried from the rest home, but Dane had to do it the hard way, watching his chance and using commando tactics on a guard who had come to accept him as a harmless nut.

In St. Louis, he'd used the "Purloined Letter" technique to hide—going back to newspaper work and using almost his real name. It had seemed to work, too. But he'd been less lucky about Harding-Blanding. The man had been in Europe on some kind of tour until his return only this last week.

Dane had seen him just once then—but long enough to be sure it was Harding—before he died again.

This time, it was in a drunken auto accident that seemed to be none of his fault, but left his body a mangled wreck.

It was almost dark when Dane dismissed the taxi at the false address, a mile from the entrance to the cemetery. He watched it turn back down the road, then picked up the valise with his camera and folding shovel. He shivered as he moved reluctantly ahead. War had proved that he would never be a brave man and the old fears of darkness and graveyards were still strong in him. But he had to know what the coffin contained now, if it wasn't already too late.

It represented the missing link in his picture of the aliens. What happened to them during the period of regrowth? Did they revert to their natural form? Were they at all conscious while the body reshaped itself into wholeness? Dane had puzzled over it night after night, with no answer.

Nor could he figure how they could escape from the grave. Perhaps a man could force his way out of some of the coffins he had inspected. The soil would still be soft and loose in the grave and a lot of the coffins and the boxes around them were strong in appearance only. A determined creature that could exist without much air for long enough might make it. But there were other caskets that couldn't be cracked, at least without the aid of outside help.

What happened when a creature that could survive even the poison of embalming fluids and the draining of all the blood woke up in such a coffin? Dane's mind skitted from it, as always, and then came back to it reluctantly.

There were still accounts of corpses turned up with the nails and hair grown long in the grave. Could normal tissues stand the current tricks of the morticians to have life enough for such growth? The possibility was absurd. Those cases had to be aliens—ones who hadn't escaped. Even they must die eventually in such a case—after weeks and months! It took time for hair to grow.

And there were stories of corpses that had apparently fought and twisted in their coffins still. What was it like for an alien then, going slowly mad while it waited for true death? How long did madness take?

He shivered again, but went steadily on while the cemetery fence appeared in the distance. He'd seen Blanding's coffin—and the big, solid metal casket around it that couldn't be cracked by any amount of effort and strength. He was sure the creature was still there, unless it had a confederate. But that wouldn't matter. An empty coffin would also be proof.

Dane avoided the main gate, unsure about whether there would be a watchman or not. A hundred feet away, there was a tree near the ornamental spikes of the iron fence. He threw his bag over and began shinnying up. It was difficult, but he made it finally, dropping onto the soft grass beyond. There was the trace of the Moon at times through the clouds, but it hadn't betrayed him, and there had been no alarm wire along the top of the fence.

He moved from shadow to shadow, his hair prickling along the base of his neck. Locating the right grave in the darkness was harder than he had expected, even with an occasional brief use of the small flashlight. But at last he found the marker that was serving until the regular monument could arrive.

His hands were sweating so much that it was hard to use the small shovel, but the digging of foxholes had given him experience and the ground was still soft from the grave-diggers' work. He stopped once, as the Moon came out briefly. Again, a sound in the darkness above left him hovering and sick in the hole. But it must have been only some animal.

He uncovered the top of the casket with hands already blistering.

Then he cursed as he realized the catches were near the bottom, making his work even harder.

He reached them at last, fumbling them open. The metal top of the casket seemed to be a dome of solid lead, and he had no room to maneuver, but it began swinging up reluctantly, until he could feel the polished wood of the coffin.

Dane reached for the lid with hands he could barely control. Fear was thick in his throat now. What could an alien do to a man who discovered it? Would it be Harding there—or some monstrous thing still changing?

How long did it take a revived monster to go mad when it found no way to escape? He gripped the shovel in one hand, working at the lid with the other. Now, abruptly, his nerves steadied, as they had done whenever he was in real battle. He swung the lid up and began groping for the camera.

His hand went into the silk-lined interior and found nothing! He was too late. Either Harding had gotten out somehow before the final ceremony or a confederate had already been here. The coffin was empty.

There were no warning sounds this time—only hands that gripped under his arms and across his mouth, lifting him easily from the grave. A match flared briefly and he was looking into the face of Buehl's chief strong-arm man.

"Hello, Mr. Phillips. Promise to be quiet and we'll release you. Okay?" At Dane's sickened nod, he gestured to the others. "Let him go. And, Tom, better get that filled in. We don't want any trouble from this."

Surprise came from the grave a moment later. "Hey, Burke, there's no corpse here!"

Burke's words killed any hopes Dane had at once. "So what? Ever hear of cremation? Lots of people use a regular coffin for the ashes."

"He wasn't cremated," Dane told him. "You can check up on that." But he knew it was useless.

"Sure, Mr. Phillips. We'll do that." The tone was one reserved for humoring madmen. Burke turned, gesturing. "Better come along, Mr. Phillips. Your wife and Dr. Buehl are waiting at the hotel."

The gate was open now, but there was no sign of a watchman; if one worked here, Sylvia's money would have taken care of that, of course. Dane went along quietly, sitting in the rubble of his hopes while the big car purred through the morning and on down Lindell Boulevard toward the hotel. Once he shivered, and Burke dug out hot brandied coffee. They had thought of everything, including a coat to cover his dirt-soiled clothes as they took him up the elevator to where Buehl and Sylvia were waiting for him.

She had been crying, obviously, but there were no tears or recriminations when she came over to kiss him. Funny, she must still love him—as he'd learned to his surprise he loved her. Under different circumstances…

"So you found me?" he asked needlessly of Buehl. He was operating on purely automatic habits now, the reaction from the night and his failure numbing him emotionally. "Jordan got in touch with you?"

Buehl smiled back at him. "We knew where you were all along, Dane. But as long as you acted normal, we hoped it might be better than the home. Too bad we couldn't stop you before you got all mixed up in this."

"So I suppose I'm committed to your booby-hatch again?"

Buehl nodded, refusing to resent the term. "I'm afraid so, Dane—for a while, anyhow. You'll find your clothes in that room. Why don't you clean up a little? Take a hot bath, maybe. You'll feel better."

Dane went in, surprised when no guards followed him. But they had thought of everything. What looked like a screen on the window had been recently installed and it was strong enough to prevent his escape. Blessed are the poor, for they shall be poorly guarded!

He was turning on the shower when he heard the sound of voices coming through the door. He left the water running and came back to listen. Sylvia was speaking.

"…seems so logical, so completely rational."

"It makes him a dangerous person," Buehl answered, and there was no false warmth in his voice now. "Sylvia, you've got to admit it to yourself. All the reason and analysis in the world won't convince him he's wrong. This time we'll have to use shock treatment. Burn over those memories, fade them out. It's the only possible course."

There was a pause and then a sigh. "I suppose you're right."

Dane didn't wait to hear more. He drew back, while his mind fought to accept the hideous reality. Shock treatment! The works, if what he knew of psychiatry was correct. Enough of it to erase his memories—a part of himself. It wasn't therapy Buehl was considering; it couldn't be. It was the answer of an alien that had a human in its hands—one who knew too much!

He might have guessed. What better place for an alien than in the guise of a psychiatrist? Where else was there the chance for all the refined, modern torture needed to burn out a man's mind? Dane had spent ten years in fear of being discovered by them—and now Buehl had him.

Sylvia? He couldn't be sure. Probably she was human. It wouldn't make any difference. There was nothing he could do through her. Either she was part of the game or she really thought him mad.

Dane tried the window again, but it was hopeless. There would be no escape this time. Buehl couldn't risk it. The shock treatment—or whatever Buehl would use under the name of shock treatment—would begin at once. It would be easy to slip, to use an overdose of something, to make sure Dane was killed. Or there were ways of making sure it didn't matter. They could leave him alive, but take his mind away. In alien hands, human psychiatry could do worse than all the medieval torture chambers!

The sickness grew in his stomach as he considered the worst that could happen. Death he could accept, if he had to. He could even face the chance of torture by itself, as he had accepted the danger while trying to have his facts published. But to have his mind taken from him, a step at a time—to watch his personality, his ego, rotted away under him—and to know that he would wind up as a drooling idiot…

He made his decision, almost as quickly as he had come to realize what Buehl must be.

There was a razor in the medicine chest. It was a safety razor, of course, but the blade was sharp and it would be big enough. There was no time for careful planning. One of the guards might come in at any moment if they thought he was taking too long.

Some fear came back as he leaned over the wash basin, staring at his throat, fingering the suddenly murderous blade. But the pain wouldn't last long—a lot less than there would be under shock treatment, and less pain. He'd read enough to feel sure of that.

Twice he braced himself and failed at the last second. His mind flashed out in wild schemes, fighting against what he knew had to be done.

The world still had to be warned! If he could escape, somehow…if he could still find a way… He couldn't quit, no matter how impossible things looked.

But he knew better. There was nothing one man could do against the aliens in this world they had taken over. He'd never had a chance. Man had been chained already by carefully developed ridicule against superstition, by carefully indoctrinated gobbledegook about insanity, persecution complexes, and all the rest.

For a second, Dane even considered the possibility that he was insane. But he knew it was only a blind effort to cling to life. There had been no insanity in him when he'd groped for evidence in the coffin and found it empty!

He leaned over the wash basin, his eyes focused on his throat, and his hand came down and around, carrying the razor blade through a lethal semicircle.

Dane Phillips watched fear give place to sickness on his face as the pain lanced through him and the blood spurted.

He watched horror creep up to replace the sickness while the bleeding stopped and the gash began closing.

By the time he recognized his expression as the same one he'd seen on his father's face at the window so long ago, the wound was completely healed.

Reincarnate

I

Thorne Boyd lay in a dark tarry pit under black stars that threw out hot blinding points of jagged lightning. And the lightning was aimed at him, crashing down in a steady tumult of sound that shattered into his mind and kept him from fainting. Where the pinpoint lightning struck, pain lanced out with soul-tearing force that threatened to sear his flesh from his bones. It was hot and cold, and all the sensations of a lifetime seemed determined to pile up on him in one malefic swoop.

The sensation was too much for his body; it tore itself away from him, leaving his brain stranded in the pit, and went tearing off through the turgid blackness. Without senses, his mind yet followed it, striving to draw it back.

"Come back, body!" he yelled at it, but there was no sound save the thundering yammering of the lightning. That seemed in some mysterious way to sense his ultimate nakedness, for it crashed down more fiercely, and the black stars threw off their veils, revealing themselves as vultures soaring in a murky sky. With inexorable precision, they wheeled slowly down toward him, beady red eyes feasting on the sight of his naked brain.

Wild thoughts ran through his mind. "Poe'd love this—only they aren't ravens." Then there was no time for thought. The monsters were so near that their wings beat a brazen cacophony in his ears. He had to leave. In a frenzied struggle, he thrust out wisps of matter from his brain to serve as legs and began running, running—but the smooth surface of the pit held him fast, and his false legs were too weak. The birds sank lower. One of them came to rest.

A strong beat, as of a heart, pulsed madly through his mind, and he let out one frantic cry that reverberated in a pitch too high for sound. Then his mind tore free and went soaring down and away, through Stygian depths that went on endlessly, toward some unknown goal. Something snapped.

"Crazy dream," he thought. Or was it? He was still in darkness, set with jagged flashes of light that formed no pattern, and sound that rushed on in a muffled discordant roar. Pain was all about him. But the insanity of fear was gone, and he began groping for a rational solution.

He could not feel his body, though that was due to the pain, probably. There had been an accident—or was that a part of the dream? And today was to be his wedding day. He struggled to get up, but his only response was a fresh stab of pain. Well, if he had to lie there, there was no other solution. Maybe there had been an accident, fatal—and this might be Hell. It certainly wasn't the other place.

Boyd settled his mind into rough order and subdued the larger part of the fear. The immediate past was still clouded, but perhaps if he went back over it, starting at the beginning of the day, some clue would come. If nothing else, a chronological review would take his mind off his present condition.

It had been the big day toward which they had been working. The smokestacks were throwing out their columns of inky oil smoke, telling of power feeding into the turbines that furnished the station with a steady, dependable supply of high-voltage, direct-current electricity. Allan Moss, old and bent, but still with the hot fire that had made him the world's greatest mathematician and physicist, was helping Boyd inspect the safety suits.

"Lot of good they'll do if anything happens in there," he grunted. "You better let me go in alone, Thorne."

Boyd shook his head, and his eyes traveled past to a figure motioning for him around the corner. Moss followed his gaze and chuckled. "Go on, son, don't keep her waiting."

Joan Abbot's dark hair was flying in the wind, her eyes filled with bubbling deviltry that seemed never to leave them. "Meany," she greeted him. "I'll bet you forgot that tomorrow was to be our day. You and your old work."

He grinned at her awkwardly, not quite sure of her banter, but pleased by it, as always. He needed her lightness and gaiety, her willingness to find the sunnier side of everything in direct contrast to his own character. Seen through her eyes, life must be a wonderful thing. Time had taught him that under the effervescence and impulsive enthusiasm there was a mind he could meet and respect.

"I haven't forgotten. Moss has agreed to drive us away as soon as he can get rid of your father, and I have the license in my pocket. Only I wish you'd let me tell your father we're being married."

"No, you can't do that. Wait till it's over and I'll spring it on the old dear. Mmm, and won't he growl, though! But it never does him any good." She gurgled and stretched herself up on tiptoes to grab for his neck. "Let's run away now! Let's, Thorne."

"No can do." He scraped his unshaven face down against hers, grinning slowly as she slapped at him. "Anyway, you're only teasing me."

She crinkled her nose up at him. "How'd you guess? Mmm." The pause that became necessary was definitely not unpleasant. "All right, Pickleface, you can go back to your work, but if you leave me at the altar—"

Moss looked up at them and tucked an almost paternal smile away in the corner of his mouth. "Been poking your nose into things that were none of your business again, youngster?" he asked her.

She nodded, peering over his shoulder at the suits. "Mm-hmm. One of the men opened the casing around your atom-smasher and let me look inside. I promised him I wouldn't tell you who he was."

"And did you understand anything you saw?"

"A little. I've been studying lately, so I'd know what Thorne is doing. He'll talk about his work all the time, and a good wife should understand, shouldn't she? What's a restrictive field, Dr. Moss?"

Moss shoved the work aside and sat down opposite her. He was always willing to answer her eternal questions, and managed somehow to make it clear. Something inside the old scientist went out to the insatiable curiosity that filled her. "A restrictive field is just what its name implies. It's a field of force generated around something and designed to hold that something within certain limits or patterns. You might say that a magnet exerts such a field on iron filings to keep them from scattering and line them up in definite patterns. Only we're using a field to hold neutrons in the uranium 'fuel' and not let them dissipate uselessly as they try to. Understand?"

"Mm. Well enough." She ran curious fingers inside the suit and examined it. "What's this for?"

"In case there's trouble inside. Just an added precaution." Boyd picked her up and set her out of his way while she squeezed his nose with a little hand. The cooing sound she made embarrassed him, but he wouldn't have made her stop it for an extra arm. "Dr. Moss and I aren't taking any risk, you see."

She appealed to Moss again, a serious note in her voice. "Why do either of you have to go? Couldn't you control it from outside or use automatic machinery?"

"Not well enough. Automatic machinery can't do things it isn't designed for. When we start ripping atoms to pieces, we'll have to expect the unexpected. That's what men were built for—emergencies."

She brushed her hair away from troubled eyes, and a frown had taken the place of her impish deviltry. "Thorne, I'm scared. Call it a sudden premonition, if you like, but don't go in there. Or let me go with you. Please."

"You stay out here and it'll be over before you know it. There's no real danger," he assured her. "If we thought there were, we wouldn't be going in, would we?"

"But if there's no danger, why can't I go in with you?"

"Because—" Feminine logic was too direct at times. "Well, your father…"

"Speaking of me?" The voice came from behind them, thin and crisp, that of a man used to giving orders without the need of backing them up with anything but money. They saw the tall, heavy figure of John Abbot entering the doorway.

Moss covered quickly. "Just warning your daughter not to go fooling around while the experiment's in progress. She's a science bug, you know, poking her nose into everything. Ordinarily, I like it, but not today."

"Okay, meanies." Joan grinned at them, though it looked a little forced, and kissed her fingers at Boyd with her back toward her father, then went tripping out, an odd look of determination on her face. Abbot squatted down on a box and watched them dourly.

"Better work," he grunted. "Some of the men are complaining about the money we've invested in this, with no results for two years. I still don't see why you needed all this for an experiment."

"I warned you it'd take five years, maybe." Moss had the patience with work and men that necessity develops in scientists. "And in dabbling with atoms, there is no small-scale experiment. The results gained then mean nothing. Finished, Thorne?"

"Yeah, the suits are in good condition. Mica's clear and the asbestos hasn't been damaged."

"Good." Moss picked up one and Boyd followed with the other, leaving Abbot staring after them. They slipped through the doors of the great barnlike experimental building and began donning their suits by the control table at one side of the forty-foot shell encasing the atom-blaster.

Boyd looked at Moss and voiced the question that had been troubling him for months. "How'd you ever pry the money out of Sourpuss in the first place?"

"I didn't. He heard the government was planning to finance my experiment and came after me on double-quick. Had visions of what government control of atomic power would mean to his utilities, and got the other financiers in with him. It's the first time he's had an employee whose orders had to be followed, and he doesn't like it." Moss chuckled. "Wonder what he'll say when you run off with his daughter?"

"Lord knows. Probably try to fire me, but I'm counting on you and her to pull me through that, if our work succeeds; anyway, if it does, he won't kick too hard. What are you planning to do after this is over?"

"Publish my monograph on restrictive fields and mathematical concepts of atomic disruption—the one with the new type of math I've spent two years teaching you." His heavily gloved fingers found the zipper on the suit finally and pulled it up, muffling his words. "After that, I'll probably visit Norman Meisner at City Hospital. Haven't seen him for years, and he's invited me down to see his latest miracle."

Thorne grunted as the zipper on his own suit slid up. "I was reading about that miracle; something about his taking a dog's brain and putting it in some mechanical body where it learned to wag its tail, wasn't it? The newspaper account gave practically no information."

"Something like that. Ready?"

"Ready!" Boyd watched the indicators as Moss turned on power into the restrictive fields that would limit the spread of neutrons and stabilize atomic breakdown. For a split second he imagined he caught a flash of movement in one corner of the building, but there was nothing there when he looked. He turned back to the panel. Power was already swelling out.

Moss leaned over, yelling above the sound of the machinery. "Looks good, eh?" A sudden flash of red sent him darting back, and his hand groped for a switch. Then a roar of light, heat, and sound cascaded out from the big shell!

For a fraction of a second, there was a scream in Boyd's ear, and he felt his hands clutch at the control switch. Then his mind blacked out, leaving only a numb nightmare of agony.

It could have been only a few seconds later when the agony brought consciousness back again. He made groping movements that sent cold throbs up to join the killing pain, and from the motions, a picture of his own condition sprang into being. His arms were half gone, there were no legs, and the body of which he had been so sure was only the withered hulk of a man—a cinder left miraculously behind to mark the fury of the atom flame! From the pain, part of his face must have been torn away, and sight and sound were gone.

Desperation killed the pain temporarily, and he fought to shout. He was on something that gave like sand, and the dull thuds around him could be only the earth vibrations of footsteps coming at a run. The blast must have thrown him free of the building, out onto the ground, and the other men were just coming up.

A faint idea was in his head, though the torture of existence fought against it. Sand below him, the stump of an arm—and no other means of telling what he wanted.

A convulsive heave threw him to what should have been his knees, and the right stump of his elbow bit down into the sand. He had only muscular memory to guide him, and the letters would have to be big. "MEISNER," the stub scrawled, and he fought backward against restraining hands that were meant to soothe him. Then: "CITY HOSP—N —" The "Y" was only half completed when his body refused to stand more and collapsed.

Now he was here—wherever here was—with only a dim idea that too much time had passed. The review of the past had only suggested that he was dead and in Hell—or in City Hospital. And that would mean—

The brain of a dog in a metal case, wagging a tail. Meisner of City Hospital, with the charred body of what had been a man, and only the first few experiments to pave the way. Boyd writhed mentally in the fantastic horror to which he had awakened and hoped suddenly that he was dead and in Hades. That at least would give him a background of familiarity. The other possibility was beyond the imagination.

II

Norman Meisner had left Germany as a boy. Had he remained, he might have become a great engineer, as he had planned. Instead, by a long chain of circumstances, he now held the reputation of being the greatest experimental surgeon on the American continent, and his word was law in the newly built experimental wing that had been added to City Hospital. Medicine was finally learning the value of "abstract" science.

"Morning, Papa Meisner," a trim nurse greeted him, and he chuckled amiably at the surprised expression that crossed the face of his companion.

"Discipline is not good, eh? But when it is brains that are needed, should a man bother with so small things? No, I think not. It is when they are happy they work best."

Dr. Martin nodded in half agreement. "You seem to get results, anyway. That's all the board's interested in. It isn't official yet, but they've decided to vote you the money you've been asking to continue this latest thing of yours."

"I don't need their money now. It is recently I have acquired a new do-nation—for experimental work only—from a rich man. I have work from him to do, as you shall see after this." He led the way down the hall to his private laboratory and smiled at the tall young man waiting outside. "The reporters all here, Tom?"

"All here. Hello, Dr. Martin."

Martin nodded at him. "Finished your course yet, Tom?"

"Full-fledged engineer now. But I've been helping Dad with the mechanical end of this new work—sort of *ex officio*."

They followed Meisner in and worked their way through the representatives of the press until they were standing beside a gleaming metal box that lay on a bare table, with only a small magnetic speaker in front of it. Its smooth surface was broken by a hole at one end and a short rubber tube that projected from the other. From inside came a faint hum and a regular muffled thudding.

"Good morning, gentlemen," Meisner greeted the reporters. "Now if you'll let me run this little show to my satisfaction…Rex, wake up!"

The tube at the rear came to sudden life and began twitching in a haphazard fashion, and a rough whining sound was emitted from the speaker. The reporters stared at it curiously, though they knew roughly what it was.

One of them started to ask a question, and the tube stopped its beating at the new sound; the speaker made a hoarse, sharp noise, almost like a bark. The barking continued until Meisner made soothing sounds that quieted it. The plump little physician patted his stomach fondly, opened the top of the box, and pointed inside.

"Life," he began, "must have food and air for energy, water to serve as a liquid medium, no? Good. And it must have blood to carry them, and something to remove the waste matter from the cells, or the blood. Also, to survive is needed white corpuscles or some other defense to kill destructive organisms, such as bacilli. Here, I have them all. When my Rex is run over, I fix him up a new body for his brain—not good, maybe, but better than nothing.

"See, here is the brain case and the big blood vessels are connected to this mechanical heart—a refinement I make on the Lindbergh-Carrel pump which you know, maybe. Here is a jet air infuser for a lung; blood goes in, loses carbonic acid gas, and picks up oxygen. So. Then up through the brain, down into this glass kidney—the same that Lindbergh also worked on—and the life-poisons come out and are a trouble no more. This is the stomach, where predigested food enters the blood by osmosis."

The newspapermen were impressed, but hardly amazed. Most of them had seen pieces of chicken's heart kept alive by the use of the Lindbergh pump and kidney before. This was merely a refinement of that, though the use of an entire brain was a big forward step. "I suppose you put in new blood as the old red corpuscles break down?" one of them asked.

"Ach, that is the beauty of this; blood I do not use." Meisner waited for their reactions until satisfied that they were properly curious. "I have a new substitute for blood. It carries food, air, and water, just as does the real, but there is no breaking down. That is the great advance."

Dr. Martin stared at him with sudden interest. "How about its effects on the cells? I suppose it's some nontoxic organic compound with a loose affinity for oxygen, but do the cells work well with it?"

"Perfectly. And—" He tapped a small chamber that had been overlooked. "Here it is sterilized. With real blood, that could not be, no? Real blood has white bodies that fight disease, but my blood washes the germs through this and *poof*—they are dead. I have given my brain all that is needed for life."

"Yeah, but how'd you get the brain in there without letting it die? And what starts the magnets that wag its 'tail'?"

Meisner shrugged. "Have you no imagination? First the blood vessels are opened and reconnected one by one, so life does not stop, until the artificial heart does all the work. Then my liquid replaces the blood, and the brain is moved to its new case—not before. And the nerve endings, which conduct faint currents of electricity from the brain, are hooked up to platinum filaments. So. And their so faint electric impulse is boosted in relays to operate the magnets and the speaker which is connected to two modulators, one for the whine and the other a bark."

He held up his hands to silence their instant protests. "So, you know nobody can trace out individual nerves, eh? That is true. But I can locate nerve bundles that lead to the ears, throat, and tail, and separate the sensory nerve bundles from the motor impulse bundles. I attach the bundles on the right places, not separating nerves, and hope maybe the brain gets some sensation—and it does. Two months Rex has had to learn in, and already he knows my voice and his name. Rex!"

Again the speaker whined and the tube that served as a tail twitched. It beat in a hopelessly disordered fashion, but apparently any beat seemed better than none to the dog's mind. The reporters examined it again, checked up on their information, and began filing out.

"Going to use it on a man sometime?" one of them asked as a parting shot.

"Why not, maybe?" Meisner turned to his son as they left and he grinned. "Maybe we use it on a man, eh? Tom, shall we honor the fine *Herr Doktor* Martin with our latest efforts?"

Tom's grin answered him. "If it won't shock the esteemed Dr. Martin."

Martin stared from one to the other, making no sense of their expressions. "Why so darned mysterious?"

Meisner took his hand on one side, and Tom marched around him to the other. "You now have the honor, Dr. Martin, of seeing—oh, skip it, come on and see for yourself. It really isn't funny, after all."

Dr. Charles Martin followed along meekly enough, as they led him, and light began to dawn. Unless he was mistaken seriously, what he was about to see had something to do with the reporter's last question.

III

Boyd fought against himself in the crazy world of chaotic sensation to which he seemed doomed, and sudden darkness rolled down over him, cutting off the disordered jumble of varicolored light that had been torturing his eyes—or where his eyes had been. With a sense of pride he realized he'd done the equivalent at least of closing his eyelids.

But the dark emphasized the solitude of the place. There was still a rushing confusion of sound, but the hours he had lain there had dimmed his consciousness of it until it formed a hazy pattern in his mind. The pains were less sharp now, mercifully.

But there was no mercy for him. In spite of himself, his mind insisted on speculating on death, though the more rational thoughts insisted that this could not be death.

A sudden torrent of fresh sound struck down on him, not loud but raucous in disorder. The sounds grew louder and changed, and he guessed that something or someone was coming closer to him. He tried to see, and again his eyes acted without his knowledge of how. Stronger light lanced out, flickering for a moment, and then burning hotly. His struggles to close his eyes again only resulted in a harsher glare, as if his pupils had dilated.

The confused sounds kept on, and there was something in the rise and fall of them that suggested speech. They were clearer than the other noises. Boyd cried out, or tried to, and was startled to hear a grating jangle. It couldn't have been his voice, yet he was sure it had come from him.

The other noises stopped momentarily, and then the sound he had made was repeated, slightly changed but recognizable. Surely no human throat could have imitated it—a hyena, perhaps, but not a man. He tried again, getting a different noise this time, and it was repeated by the other.

There was a silence for a moment, and a clear tone broke in, different from the rest. It was hoarse, but lacked the confusion of all former sounds. *"Dit-dit-dit-dit,"* it said in short clicks. Then there was a slight pause, and it began again, this time in longer signals mixed with the short ones. *"Dit…dit-dah-dit-dit…dit-dah-dit-dit…dah dah-dah."*

The short clicks and longer ones resembled something he had heard. He groped around in his mind, seeking the answer, and finally found it. The irregular frequency was that of a telegraph sounder, and the clicks must be code. It came again, and he listened more closely, piecing out the letters. "H…E…?…?…O."

"Hello!" That was what they were saying. But his knowledge of code was too limited. As a boy, he had known a friend who operated a ham station, but all he had ever learned were the symbols for THE, I, and SOS. That gave six letters out of twenty-six. He started to return the signal they sent with whatever noise his throat chose to make, depending on the length instead of articulation of sound, but thought better of it. If he made no reply, they might realize he could not understand.

There was a conference of noises, and the clicking again, all short this time. One click, space, two clicks, space, three—They were running over the numbers in the simplest of codes. Clumsily he repeated, and the numbering left off. Then the clicker reverted to a series of mixed short and long sounds, with spaces coming in irregular order. He counted the sounds between spaces and made out twenty-six. As the signals started again, he checked. The fifth was E, the eighth H, and the others fitted in. They were sending the alphabet for him to memorize. He selected four of the most necessary letters and concentrated on them until he was sure he could make an intelligible sentence.

"Where am I?"

There was an excited buzzing of sounds, and the clicker broke out quickly, "-o- are i- the -it- hos-ita- to -et we--." So he was in City Hospital and they were trying to patch up what was left of him. But how much was that. Something was wrong with his sight, his hearing, and his voice, and he had no ability to move any other part—or at least could feel no response.

The alphabet was running through again, certain letters emphasized by longer space between them this time. He made a sound when satisfied that he knew them, and the sounder began picking out words slowly and carefully.

"This is Meisner. You are making out well. You must rest now. We will make you well. We must leave now. The machine that makes ABC will stay to keep teaching you. You must not worry."

Even the simple sentences brought half comfort, suggesting as they did the possibility of communication. Boyd made the proper sounds for "yes," and the noises that were voices began to fade away. The machine kept up its alphabetical discourse.

They were almost gone when Boyd remembered the questions he must ask and shouted. There was a series of increasing sounds, and a voice answered.

"Moss?" he spelled.

"Dead!"

"How long?"

"A month," the answer came. "No worry. All is well."

Then the voices receded again, and he knew he was alone. So Moss was dead, and it was a month since he had been conscious. They must have kept his mind drugged while the pain of healing was going on, and the ache he was now experiencing must come from muddled sensations. A month, while he had lain here in a fog, and the world had gone on without him.

It must have been hell for Joan, he thought. Next time the men came to see him, he'd ask about her, if he wasn't too horrible for her to see. Perhaps it would be better if she never visited him. As a future husband, he was a washout.

The clicking of the machine called his mind back, and he turned his thoughts to the code, glad for a reason to forget all the troubles that were looming up for the future. Hours sped by, and the machine buzzed on, leaving the alphabet for simple primer sentences. He seemed to have no desire for sleep, and the light flashes finally disappeared, leaving him in darkness that was soothing. Some of the noises in the background disappeared, and he realized it was night.

The machine went back to simple words, and there was a new element "Man" it spelled out. "M." The letter was followed by a different noise, then "A" and another. Finally the whole word was spelled in completion and a longer noise that resembled the voice sounds of the men. They were trying to teach him to speak!

The sounds that followed the letters seemed all alike at first, but slowly he noted minor differences that clarified as he studied them. They bore no resemblance to speech as he remembered it, being a jumble of whistles, buzzes, and things for which there was no name. Dutifully, he tried to imitate them, but the response was disheartening. In the hours that followed he learned there were just thirty-one sounds he could make, and that making them in any logical order was going to take education. His voice refused to respond to the old patterns of speech in any sensible fashion. And some of the sounds he had regarded as primary were now made up of more than one. A vowel might require two or more sounds blended in rapid order.

But slowly the distinctions between the sounds he could hear became plainer, and he was able to grasp in a dim way the meaning of a few words out of each simple sentence before the code form was spelled out. It was slow, grim work and only the desperate urge for knowledge of himself drove him on.

Light was streaking back again as he made his last efforts at speech. Surprisingly enough, at the twentieth time ordered sound came out. "I am." The words that man had first spoken in the dim past when consciousness of self was new. Now they marked a milestone in his progress as great as that first effort.

He could not repeat them, though he tried. But what he had done once could be done again, in time; he might learn even to recognize the weird conglomeration that constituted speech for him with a semblance of ease. At least he would not be doomed forever to solitude.

He was! For the time, that would have to suffice.

IV

"The prince kissed her lightly," oozed the telegraphone with nice unction, "and Sleeping Beauty opened her eyes and smiled at him. Then they were married and lived happily ever after."

Boyd swore mentally at the recording. It wasn't bad enough to stay awake twenty-four hours a day in Hell, but they had to furnish recordings to remind him of his sleepless condition. Not that he needed sleep, apparently. But a little merciful oblivion would have been welcome. Still, the machine was familiarizing him with the hoots and gargles that represented spoken language.

Grumbling to himself, he turned his attention to the chart that hung over him. By a series of manipulations that normally would have made his eyes act in a distinctly abnormal manner, he finally focused on it and began piecing out the characters. They all looked like blobs of wax that had been left too long in the sun, but careful study was bringing some sense out of them.

He could recognize the straight lines now, and a few letters of the alphabet, though he had to take their words about the beauty of the girl's face in the central picture. So far, motion was the only thing that registered properly, when he could keep it in focus.

"Like using the faceted eyes of an insect," he growled. Then it didn't sound right; he repeated it. That was better. His new voice still insisted on getting the whistle that went with "k" mixed up with the rushing cough that stood for "e."

Someone was at the door, coming toward him, from the sound. He waited until a moving blob registered on his eyes, looked for what he had come to know as a beard, and decided from its absence that the visitor was Tom Meisner. There was another figure with him, thinner, and also without a beard.

"Hello, Boyd." Tom's clear-cut English identified him further. "I've brought you a visitor—Mr. Abbot."

Looking at the other, Boyd decided it did look something like Abbot. Careful inspection revealed the bald spot on the man's head, and he felt a sudden glow of pride at his achievement. Then it disappeared into the usual gloom. "Hello," he said slowly. "I didn't expect to see you, Mr. Abbot."

"And why not?" From the speed of the words, the question was probably meant to be good-natured, though the fine nuances of tone failed to register. "You've been costing me a small fortune, Thorne, so I figured I might as well see what was coming of it."

"You've been paying for me?" It was news to Boyd, though he had wondered about the financial end of it. "Why?"

Something that might have been a chuckle came from Abbot. "Not from sentimental reasons, as you've guessed. I've been paying because I need your memory and knowledge. When I saw what you'd scrawled in the sand, I figured you'd learned something that might prove the solution to the problem of power, and took you to Meisner. What was it?"

"Mostly nothing. Instinct of self-preservation, I guess, made me write that. You've had experts go over the wreck?"

"Naturally, and they don't understand it. Some of Moss's notes are incomplete, and the equipment is pretty well ruined. The other investors in the work are yelling about the money they've put in, and I've got to show results." Abbot paused, and Boyd guessed which one of the investors was most worried about the money. "At least, you can supply the information in the missing notes."

"It wouldn't do any good, sir. All I know is that the field we'd built up collapsed just after it started, and the experiment went wild before the neutrons were dissipated enough for the reaction to stop. Theory doesn't explain that, and another test might give you more things like me. If I could go over the wreck and try again, I might find the trouble. But—"

"Good." Abbot picked up his hat and started to leave. "Hurry up and learn to use your arms and legs, and I'll see you don't lose if it works." He motioned Tom back and went out the door alone, leaving Boyd's mind in a state of numbed shock.

Learn to use his arms and legs! He'd been thinking of himself as a brain in a box, with nothing but the senses of sight and hearing, but that was apparently false. Now, perhaps he wasn't like the dog in the newspaper item. Perhaps—Fifty wild conjectures ran through his mind in the half second it took him to call Tom.

Young Meisner sat down within range of his sight, and his voice was low and calm. "I know, Boyd. Take it easy. We didn't tell you about it because we wanted you to spend all your time learning to see and talk. But you're about as complete as we can make you. Ever read any of those robot stories?"

"Yes, but—"

"Well, in a rough way, that's what you are now. There wasn't enough of your body left to save, so we gave you a new one. In some ways, it can't equal the old one, but it has points of superiority. The blood system insures your brain against disease and fatigue. You'll never need sleep because all poisons are removed as they form. You'll never have to worry about your body wearing out, because new parts can be added. And you'll probably live longer than Methuselah, since your brain cells are perfectly fed and cared for. For instance, the thermostatic controls that keep your brain and spinal cord at the right temperature are far more sensitive and dependable than the normal bodily methods."

Some of those, Boyd decided, weren't assets. He'd have given a lot for one night's sleep and forgetfulness, and the idea of living a long time might prove a mixed blessing. But there was no use of complaining about that. "How'd you do it?"

"By combining Dad's surgical skill with what I know of engineering, and getting a lot of outside help," Tom answered. "Your ears are vocoders, breaking down sound into its basic elements. For a voice, you have the opposite, a voder, that takes the basic elements and recombines them. We couldn't hope to re-create anything like the original, since nature, working with millions of unified cells, is devilishly complex. But the substitutes will serve fairly well.

"You have a television scanner for eyes, connected to the optic nerves, and the nerves governing your eye muscles are hitched on to change the focus tubes and move them about. We used a photoelectric cell to govern the iris setting, but you can control that to some extent. Incidentally, our biggest trouble was getting a television hookup that would work properly with lenses having a focal length short enough to give sufficient depth of field to your sight, and the wide-angle f:10 lenses had to be made specially.

"Most of the apparatus is located in your torso, of course, along with the new high-power accumulator coils to furnish power. Not having your atomic energy yet, that's the best we could do, so you'll need recharging regularly."

"Mmm." In a hazy way, Boyd had figured out part of that for himself, but his chief interest was in motility. "What about the muscles in arms and legs?"

"Magnets. Dad planned on using motors and sliding shafts, but that would have taken a body the size of an elephant. We used thin disk magnets with a one-tenth-inch gap between them. A hundred of them equal a ten-inch gap, and there's no comparison between the two when it comes to pull exerted. Where the big gap might not work, the series of small ones pack in plenty of power. The old inverse-square law that applies to all force fields, you know."

The door opened again with a faint creak, and Meisner's thick pronunciation broke in on them. "So?" He moved over beside his son. "So you tell our Mr. Boyd all about himself, eh? All I hear is how good an engineer you are to make a body like this. How you feel, Boyd?"

"A little better, now that I won't be cramped down in a box all my life. What about the sense that governs muscular movements?"

"You see, Dad, he wants to know. You can boast about your part when I'm finished." Boyd made out that Tom and Meisner were grinning at each other as the younger man went on. "We used piezoelectric crystals as pressure detectors in the muscle piles. They should gauge the effort applied by the magnets and serve as a fair kinesthetic sense. Temperature sense isn't so important to you, but we used thermocouples for that, and gyroscopes attached to the balance-organ nerves supply a sense of balance."

Meisner nodded. "And so you are a man again. A brain and spinal cord from nature taken, a body made from skill. We hook the nerves to wire filaments, indiscriminately, and they learn again. Maybe then you are once more complete."

"Sounds like a horrible mess to me," Boyd stated.

"Maybe. But it is nature that makes the so horrible mess. One million cells she puts in a muscle, and makes them work as one. A hundred little habits of thought that you don't know about she gives you by experience, to work those million cells. No, that we could not duplicate. We've simplified, instead. That you could do all that you did before would be impossible, but that you could approximate normal activity—yes. Good, eh?"

"If I learn. But all the sensations I get are completely distorted."

Again Meisner disagreed. "Not distorted, but different. You are again a baby. Are the eyes of a baby incomplete? No. But he has learned no habits of understanding the messages sent by his eyes, and he cannot fully see. Even a boy of five may draw a picture that to him looks like his mother, and to you or me, like nothing.

"It is the old senses that lie as much as the new. You must forget the old habits and new ones acquire. In his head, man sees upright, but the message on the nerves is reversed. Glasses have been built to reverse this, and for a time sight seems upside down; then, in a few weeks, the brain corrects, and all looks normal. Now it is without the glasses that sight is wrong. So.

"I could sort afferent nerve bundles from efferent. I could trace the ones to the ears, to the eyes, to other parts. But the separate nerves? No, never. And they would not work with the new sensors and motors, anyhow. So the message is sent to the brain—without any system it is sent. And the brain, that great organizer, it must learn to find habits that work with them. It will. In time new habits you will learn, and then your senses will no longer distort."

Boyd turned it over in his mind, and partly agreed. Already sound was beginning to seem more natural to him, and there was some promise of his eyes working properly. He tried to see his body, but the movement of his eye tubes was too limited for that. Meisner seemed to sense his desire.

"There is a mirror here." He moved away for a few seconds, and came back carrying something. Tom helped him adjust it. "So. Now look, if you must."

Boyd looked. At first, he saw only a vague blur, but as he analyzed it part by part, some meaning began to come out of what he saw. That was a straight line, that a curve, and another straight line at a forty-five-degree angle. His mind built up a picture from the separate messages sent to it.

He was big, far bigger than any normal man; probably the problems of structure had necessitated that. And his head was too large even for his body. They had made little effort to copy the human form accurately. Tubes stuck out in front of his face for eyes, and there was no nose or chin. He realized quickly that he looked less human than the various robots that had been built for stage exhibition purposes.

And in that body he was supposed to move about among the normal people of the world! There could be no concealing it in coats and hats, no hope of being anything but a freak for people to stare at. Men distrust the unknown, and he would have few if any friends. No home, no social life—no wife!

Surely he couldn't expect Joan to marry him in such a form. Perhaps that was why they had kept her from seeing him. He was a monster, a creation that even Frankenstein would have shunned as unholy. All that was left to tie him to the world of men was a job to be finished.

"All right," he said. "Help me sit up and put that mirror where I can watch myself. I've got to learn how to handle these muscles you gave me, if I can start the things twitching."

V

The razor blade was absolutely steady in the big hand and the hair moved toward it surely until it was split smoothly down the center. The other hand picked up one of the pieces, and this time the blade moved against the half hair, splitting it into quarters of the original.

Boyd tapped one finger against the palm of his hand in a clicking sound he used to express satisfaction; some of the old habits had been redesigned to work with the new body. Being made of metal made for steadiness, at least, as the split hair proved, and the auxiliary lenses changed the focal length of his eyes to his optional telescopic or microscopic sight. Now he slipped the lenses off and put them in the fur-lined pouch that was attached to his body.

Tom Meisner opened the door of the office and came in, his lips blue with the cold, beating his hands together to warm them. "All set, Boyd," he said. "The transformers just came in. Want I should start the men on them?"

Boyd grunted. "Guess so. Abbot's still climbing on me for being so slow. I'll go along and help with the installation." Tom had been doing good work since the return to the station, and he was glad to have the young engineer as an addition to his staff. He rose from his seat, a little jerkily as the faint giddiness of motion hit him. His balance sense still wasn't in perfect tune, and a slight dizziness usually accompanied any change of position. For a second, he moved his legs carefully, then sureness came back.

"The X-ray plates for the transformer cores they sent okay?"

"Yeah, seem to be. I can't find a trace of flaw in any of the stuff this time. *Brr!* It's colder than Billy-be-damned. How you can stand it without an—" He caught himself suddenly. "Skip it!"

Even though he had been largely responsible for Boyd's body, Tom still made those little mistakes. And his acceptance of Boyd as a man at such times bothered more than the frank stares of the others. It was bad enough to be an object of ridicule, but to have the other man start treating him normally and suddenly realize the difference was worse.

"I wouldn't get much good out of an overcoat," Boyd answered his unfinished question. "It's a good thing you chose chrome steel for the foot plates, though, with all this slush on the ground."

His heavy feet made harsh plopping sounds in the muck that served as a constant reminder of his strangeness. One of the men stopped his work to stare as he passed, wonder still written large on his face, though Thorne had been at the station nearly a month now. Then the man turned quickly and too obviously back to his work, avoiding Boyd's eyes.

The men were uncomfortable, he could see, as they worked under his orders, setting the big transformers in place, coupling them up, and adjusting them. Some of them had worked with him before, on easy terms of camaraderie, and it was hardest for them. They tried their best to act toward him as if nothing had happened, and their efforts failed miserably.

Some of the new men made jokes about him behind his back and called him "Frankie," derived mistakenly from Frankenstein. That did not worry him; if men could treat his new body as a joke and be serious about the brain in it, life would be tolerable. But they pitied him, instead, and looked down at him from superior normality. They were a little too quick to accept his orders, to address him as "Mr. Boyd," to laugh at his attempted jokes.

He caught up one end of a beam the men were working with and twisted it around to the position they wanted. For a minute, they looked up with surprise and admiration, then it faded. Boyd's sharp ears caught the remark one of them made. "Why shouldn't he be strong? Automobiles got strong engines, too. He don't need to show off in front of us."

"Shut up, dammit!" the other growled, but there was the same hint of dislike in his voice.

That's how it was. If he did what they couldn't, they resented it; if he failed to do anything they could, they were condescendingly pitying. He was a freak, something hashed together from an accident, which should have killed him, and they had to take orders from him. There was no way he could win their respect or friendship, since those were reserved for men with human bodies and limitations.

Tom came back as the last transformer was being swung up and in by the donkey engine hoist. "Dad phoned he was coming out this afternoon to check up on your progress," he said. "Should be here any minute."

"Good." Thorne liked Tom's father better than anyone else he'd seen since the accident; the physician worked on bodies but respected only brains. "Abbot's dropping over, too, to let me understand just what each day's delay costs him."

"He would, of course. He was decent enough about it all when we still had you back at City, but now he thinks there's no more excuse." Tom glanced back toward the door and waved. "There's Dad now—hey! Watch it there!"

The friction clutch on the hoist holding the transformer was slipping and the mass of metal began to fall, wobbling sidewise. At Tom's yell, Hennessy, who was waiting for it, started to jump back quickly, but the awkwardness of fright tripped him. He sprawled flat, clawing wildly, and the transformer began slipping more rapidly.

Boyd had no time to think of the signals his brain must send out. He shot full power into the magnets and jumped forward in two twenty-foot leaps that brought him under it, his arms up to catch it. His head spun with sudden giddiness, but the weight in his arms slowed reluctantly, came to a stop, and he stood straining at the pull of it. It threatened to carry him down, but the full strength of the body they had given him resisted, fighting to hold it and retain his balance.

The other men shut their mouths and darted in now, pulling Hennessy out from under; the man had fainted. Then they came forward to catch at the transformer and help Boyd, but Tom's quick voice barked out. "Stop it! You'll do more harm than good."

Slowly Boyd moved it, edging his way forward half an inch at a time until it came to rest over its supports. He let his knees flex slightly as it settled, then it was still, ready to be bolted in. As he let go, a sick weight seemed to leave his mind. A few pounds or seconds more would have been too much.

He stopped to examine the metal on one arm, looking for dents or scratches, and finding none. For the first time, the full realization of the strength that was his came to him; four ordinary men would have buckled under the load. But there was no pride in it—the achievement was really that of the Meisners, who had built the body, not of himself. And the other men could hardly admire him for doing a mechanical job well with a machine for a body.

But the remarkable recuperative powers of his synthetic circulation system came into play almost at once, freeing his brain of the toxins of its efforts in commanding full power from the muscle piles, and he felt no ill effects. Meisner stood beside him, raging at him hotly.

"Nincompoop! Maybe it's mountains you'll move next, eh? Is it no gratitude that you should try to destroy the life I gave you? One slip and—*ploosh!*—it squashes you flat on the thin abdominal walls, and your nice new heart is kaput! Maybe you could live without a heart, eh? So? I think not!"

Boyd looked at the surgeon and there was a grin in his mind, though no change could show on his face. "Why all the fuss? You wanted to test me; there's your test."

"So. Maybe it is. And there is nothing now wrong with you but that you think too much about yourself and how different you are. You should forget that."

One of the men tapped Meisner's shoulder. "Did—you mean the accident might have killed him?" he asked.

"And why not? The brain he has—maybe—is as soft as yours, the fool. Did you think he was solid iron?"

"No. No, I guess not." The man shook his head doubtfully and moved back to his fellows, where the unconscious Hennessy was slowly coming around.

A voice coughed from the doorway, and they turned to see Abbot standing there.

"Nice work, Thorne," he commented. "Those transformers cost money, and having a man killed here might cause trouble."

"As much as a day's delay?"

"More." Abbot chuckled. "All right, no talk of money today, then. How's it coming?"

"Most of the new stuff is in. Be ready to make a trial next week," Boyd decided. "And I'm glad you let me hire Tom, here. He's been doing some fine work, and the men do well under his instructions."

Abbot frowned slightly. "Mm-hm. A week, you say? But—All right, I said I wouldn't say anything about it today, and I won't. There's someone I want to bring out when you go through with it. This…person insists on being present."

Meisner glanced at him quickly. "You mean—Maybe it should be. The—person might benefit by it, even."

"It's dangerous enough for me alone, without a stranger."

Tom stuck his oar in, shaking his head at Boyd. "It's okay. I know whom they mean, and I think you should do it, danger or not."

"Anyway, I'm still in charge of the station," Abbot pointed out smoothly. He took Boyd's reluctant consent for granted. "Good, it's settled then. Want to ride in with me, Dr. Meisner?"

"I think so, yes. I'm not needed here. And Boyd, I shall expect to be present here when already you start the test." Meisner slapped the metal chest and followed Abbot out. Tom and Boyd turned back to the men who were finishing their work.

One of the men gestured, and they stopped. "Well, Hennessy?"

Hennessy hesitated, looking uncomfortable, but another man urged him on. "Look, boss, I—Well, some of us are going to town tonight, boss, to take in a show, and we thought…well—want to come with us?"

For once Boyd was glad that his face was expressionless as he looked at the others and saw that they were all in on the invitation. But it wouldn't do to embarrass them in town with his presence, especially now that they had suddenly thawed. "Thanks, boys," he answered. "I appreciate the offer, but there's a full night's work waiting for me. I'm on a twenty-four-hour schedule this week."

There was no look of relief on their faces, as he had expected, but only the look to be found whenever a friendly invitation is turned down for good reason. "Any idea what happened?" he asked Tom as they moved away.

"A little. For one thing, you saved Hennessy when they couldn't, at some risk to yourself. They heard Dad say you could be killed, and men are funny, that way; they're just selfish enough to dislike anyone who can't be hurt, because they'd like that ability themselves and can't get it. Now, because you stand about as good a chance of getting killed as they do, they're back on even footing with you."

Whatever the reason, it would be a blessing to work with them as a man again, even though their social life was in another world. Boyd had a mental picture of himself at a show, and it didn't appeal to him. Companionship, even when offered, was impossible for him.

VI

There was a hint of snow in the air, and the temperature outside was so low that Boyd had been forced to wear heavy rubbers to keep the dampness from getting onto his feet and freezing the joints stiff. He clumped around in them now, thoroughly enjoying the ribbing the men were giving him about catching pneumonia. They had loosened up remarkably in the last week.

Now preparations for the test were complete, and they were waiting for Abbot and Meisner to arrive before starting. Tom was still begging to go in with him while the test was run, but Boyd was firm.

"No soap, Tom. Having this whosit of Abbot's is bad enough. I wanted to take the risk alone, since I could probably stand another explosion fairly well, but I don't want three in there. You'd be needed anyway to build me a new body if this one gets wrecked." He wiggled his shoulders uncomfortably and scratched at his back. "Darn it, there's a place on my back that itches."

Tom grinned, then saw that he was serious. "How could it?"

"I don't know, but it does. Every time I get cold, it itches. You must have put a defective thermostat in there, or gotten some nerves mixed up." He tapped his back sharply. "There, that does it. A light blow works sometimes."

"I'll have a look at you later when Dad's around," Tom offered. "Maybe I'd better increase your foot heaters at the same time. Anyhow, it's a good thing we fixed it so you had electrical heat over your whole body if you insist on running around in the cold. Otherwise, your lubrication might stiffen up."

Boyd grunted, looking down the road. "Here comes Abbot, and your father must be with him—there are two in front, and it looks a little like someone behind. I'd rather not talk to them now, Tom, so I'm going inside, and you meet them here. Send in whosit, if Abbot still insists. By the way, is he dry behind the ears yet?"

"Partly. Had a little science in college and been studying since, but it's mostly scientific curiosity. You'll have no trouble, though." Tom grinned at him, but Boyd could see nothing funny as he went into the experimental building. Even a well-trained helper might be a nuisance, and sending in a greenhorn was as idiotic a thing as he could think of.

He couldn't help thinking of another person filled with incessant craving to know. Work and the need of relearning himself had filled his time until Joan had been pushed into the background, but now her image came surging up, bringing futile longings to his mind. Always in the background, he had missed her prying eyes and bubbling saucy grin. But they still told him that Joan was sick, too sick to see him. That was probably an excuse to spare his feelings.

Love, he supposed, was gone, since that was basically a physical sensation, but respect, fondness, and desire for her company persisted. He needed her now, more than ever.

Meisner had been right; he did think too much of himself and his own differences. Life to him was a serious thing at best, and in his new body it had assumed a tragic mood. He knew it, but with the queer twist of his brain, the knowledge only made it worse. He needed someone to laugh at him, to love him, and to show him the gaiety and humor that lay all about him, someone like Joan who could lend him her eyes and let him forget his own brooding.

To a lesser extent, Allan Moss had done the same, and he was another that Boyd missed. The old physicist's theories and plans were familiar to him now, but he still would have welcomed the firm guidance of the scientist, now more than ever. Instead of that, they were sending a science bug to add to his troubles.

Then a metallic clanking behind him broke through his thoughts, and he swung quickly away from the control panel toward the door. Cold wonder caught at him as he saw the creature moving toward him. It was larger than a man, its shiny metal body topped by a head without either chin, neck, or face, save for tubes to serve as eyes. In every line and pattern, it might have been a mirror image of himself!

The figure moved forward calmly, holding out a hand. "Tom Meisner told me you were all ready to begin. It's good to see you, Thorne!"

Thorne! Boyd groped numbly, hunting some streak of light. Only Moss and a few others had used his first name, and now—It had to be Moss! If he had escaped, the physicist might have also, though in little better shape. Since it had apparently taken long to recuperate and relearn, he must have been even worse hit. And Abbot had made them say he was dead so that Boyd would be willing to rush things through before the other could come out. That made sense.

He stretched out a metal hand quickly, feeling confidence again for the first time since his return to the station. "And I can't say how glad I am to see you, sir. I've been trying to carry on, but you're needed here. Want to take over?"

A funny choking sound came from the other. "I'm afraid you'll have to do it all this time, Thorne. I'm not…I won't be much help to you. Any idea of what caused the failure before?"

"Some idea," he said doubtfully, taking the control seat and pulling out the chair for the other. Obviously, Moss hadn't entirely recovered from the shock, but his mere presence helped. "It doesn't entirely suit me, and I'd rather not mention it until I find out whether it was purely mechanical defects that caused the field to collapse. Ready?"

"Ready."

Boyd closed the switches and watched power drain into the big shell, his eyes glued to the indicators that shifted erratically before he could balance them accurately. Then they found their marks and held. Nothing seemed wrong there. One second went by, then others followed it. He counted slowly to fifty, and still there was no sign of failure. The power needle that indicated energy release within the shell quivered and began to climb, and all was still in balance. Boyd settled back somewhat, relief spreading through his mind. It was working.

Plop! A thin red light cut on quickly and the needles quivered suddenly, crazily. He tensed himself for movement, wondering whether he could make the switch in time, and looked down. His hand was resting quietly on the switch and every needle was dead! His new arm had moved before the thought was more than beginning in his mind.

Quick reactions and no damage! That had been the trouble before; the ordinary motor impulse had traveled along Moss's arm at a comparatively slow speed, in common with all neural impulses, and things had happened before he could reach the switch. But Boyd's nerves were filaments of silver and the electrical impulse traveled down them with almost the speed of light, while the muscle packs threw the hand forward faster than the eye could see, before the field had entirely failed.

His companion stirred uneasily. "Is it over?"

"That test is, and a failure. Thank heaven, not a fatal one, this time." He gathered up the kit of high-tension testing meters they used and moved from the control seat toward the shell. Now he was more than willing to have the other here. Of all the men he could have chosen for a helper, Moss in his new body alone had reaction lime quick enough for the work.

"You'll have to watch the board, sir," he said. "It's in balance now, do just throw the switch on when I signal, and keep your eyes glued on the panel. If a red light comes on or the needles bob, cut it off. You'll be able to do it in time."

He set up the meters quickly, cutting in through the insulation mound the transformers and the box to the shell. At his motion, the switch was thrown, and his pointers began pouring out their messages, registering the surprisingly delicate balance of current on his dials. Then, while he was still analyzing them, they went dead.

"Failure again," the other reported. "Find out what the trouble was?"

Boyd assorted the results in his head until the jigsaw pattern shaped up. "Yes. It's simple enough, though we'd never have guessed it before that first attempt because of that simplicity. Back E.M.F. of a sort, you might say. When power starts feeding in, it induces a back pressure in our field coils, like the back current generated in a running electric motor. That current gets into the transformers and throws the balance of power feeding into the field off kilter, with the results we've seen. I think I know where the trouble starts."

"But can we fix it today?"

"Why not? I suspected it, and there's everything here to work with. We can do it together in half an hour and not bother the men." It was strange to be explaining things to Moss and be giving orders, but the other seemed to expect it. Boyd motioned as the robot came down. "We'll yank this section of the shell out. If my idea works, we can shunt it around harmlessly."

Again he was thankful for the presence of his companion. Mechanical bodies, he was finding, had very definite points of superiority. They had prevented disaster twice already, and now they promised to save the necessity of making room for a crew of men and machines that would have been needed for the job. Even with Moss's odd hesitation and uncertainty, sheer brute force coupled with good mental co-ordination could work wonders.

The half hour was only slightly past when he pulled the control chair up and cut the switch in again. There was the usual lag, and then the power needle began climbing, took a sudden lurch, and settled down at the highest mark on the dial. There was a smooth high drone in the air that continued minute after minute, spelling out power in unbelievable quantities and fully under control.

"Okay, sir," Boyd said finally. "We've done it, and I'm glad you were where you could see it."

The other figure stirred uncomfortably, then looked up at him with a sound that held amusement. "Are you, Pickleface? You didn't seem to want me where I could see it before."

Something that should have been the pit of Boyd's stomach went numb, and his eyes shifted erratically out of focus. Gulping sounds came from his vocal apparatus, but they made no sense. Why should they? There was no sense left in the world itself.

Something that approximated a soft laugh came from the other. "Dad told me I wasn't to let you know until after the experiment and warned me you might think I was Dr. Moss. You should have heard the fight I put up to get here!" Again she giggled. "Poor old Pickleface. Don't you like me, now that I'm hairless and ugly?"

"Joan!" The numbness left him in a rush, and he dived for her, only to realize what the loss of lips meant. "Joan, you crazy little fool! So that's what I heard before the explosion?"

Her voice was flat, as usual, but he sensed mockery and guilt in her words. "Mm-hmm. I sneaked in and hid before it began, behind the transformer bank. That's what saved me, I guess. From what they told me, we landed not three feet apart, though I didn't come to until I was in City Hospital. Father thought that if you had a chance at life, I should have the same. Mad at me, Thorne?"

Even without lips, he showed her he wasn't.

Later, when some of the shouting was over and Abbot had gone in to stand over the big shell and gaze fondly at the power indicator, they found Meisner alone in the office. The doctor made room for the two big bodies, grinning at them paternally.

"So it's married my model patient and my not-so-model one shall be, eh? Abbot has told me already."

Boyd relaxed on the seat, realizing that his mind had refused to rest and be peaceful for months. It was almost a novelty. "Married we shall," he answered, "though I suppose it's mostly a formality with us. Funny thing, Abbot seems willing enough now, for some reason."

"That isn't so funny, is it, Papa Meisner? Dr. Moss left you his interests in this, and you're almost rich now. Anyway, just picture poor Dad trying to get anyone else to marry me now!" Joan twisted one of his big fingers possessively. "This time, Mr. Thorne Boyd, there'll be no convenient accidents to save you. I won't let you out of my sight until it's over." Meisner patted Boyd's metal chest. "Me, I think I shall also see there are no more delays. So. And be maybe your best man. Life is not so bad, eh?"

"With twenty-four hours a day for years and years together and never a gray hair or a wrinkle?" Joan kicked her heels together and giggled. "Even Pickleface should be happy now."

The change had made no difference in her, Boyd thought, wondering when she would tire of the nickname; well, if she kept using it, he'd have to learn to like it yet. No, life wasn't so bad. There was work for him now, with men who respected him, a rough friendship with Meisner and Tom, and most important of all, companionship with his own kind.

"I'm growing rather attached to this body," he admitted. "Except for one thing. I can't smoke. A cigarette is too small for my air vents, and any holder I've tried is liable to get stuck in them or else it scratches some of the filters off. If I hold it in front, I get just enough nicotine to tantalize me. Think you can fix it?"

Meisner chuckled and winked at Joan. "Never satisfied, this man of yours, I think. Well, we can fix that, maybe." He held out a silvered case. "Try a cigar."

Boyd grunted. He hadn't thought of that!

Conditioned Reflex
[Mind of Tomorrow]

Paul Ehrlich looked up from his wheat cakes in time to see his father exploding upward out of his chair and heading for the kitchen. By barking his shins against the table leg, he barely managed to catch the older man's arm and swing him forcibly back. The sharp pain did nothing to decrease his irritation.

"Dammit, Justin, I told you to stop bothering Gerda, and I meant it! She has trouble enough trying to get her work done in sixteen hours without your upsetting her. Now sit down and eat—and let her alone!"

"Someday, Paul, I'm going to teach you I can still thrash you!" Justin Ehrlich dropped into the chair, but the rebellion on his face remained. "The butter is sour! I told her I would not eat sour butter!"

"Then you'll go without, unless you want to build us a cream separator so the milk won't have to stand long enough for the cream to rise. You can't make sweet butter from sour cream. Besides, butter is a luxury; we're lucky to have cows."

"Yeah. Gotta get a bull, though." Harry Raessler sopped up the last dribble of beet syrup with a scrap of pancake and pointed glumly through the crude glass window to the world outside the log and mud-brick house. "Tain't the same world you was born to, Mr. Ehrlich. My wife sure tries, but she's only got two hands. C'mon, Paul, we better get busy on that barn roof."

Paul nodded and followed his partner out, with a feeling of relief at leaving his father's contrariness behind. The old man must be getting senile, if his guess at the meaning of the word was correct. Complaints and grumblings! They were leading a life that would have been heaven to most of the people still alive—and few men over fifty were included in that group. He shook his head again, and went on splitting shakes off big pine blocks, while Harry began pounding the crookedness out of their small collection of rusty nails.

There had been a time when his father had seemed almost godlike to him, and he had to admit that their present wealth was only partly due to his own efforts. Justin had fled to MacQuarie Island when he foresaw the Fifth War, and his provision for the stay had proved as adequate as his selection of retreat had been wise. For over twenty years he had continued his research there, until the war burned from nations to villages and flickered out. And only then had he consented to the long, dangerous voyage.

But however well he had foreseen the consequences of the war, he had refused to adapt to them, once they were back, and the burden had been Paul's from then on. Nineteen years of the hell of material energy had done its worst, and starvation had killed half of the world's surviving sixty million. Now they had reverted to a rude cross between early pioneer and normal farmer, and life was going on. At least there was land enough, much of it still good, though the materials to farm it were mostly destroyed. Still, Paul had done well enough. In the two years since the boat had docked and he had traded it for other things, he had tramped the country, bartering his way to the security of half this place, and pulling his father with him. And now, after three months' partnership with the Raesslers, Justin…

"Paul! Drat it, Paul, where are you? Oh!" The old man came storming imperiously around the barn corner, swearing at the rubble under his feet and interrupting his son's bitter musing. "I thought you told me my equipment came yesterday. Where the devil did you hide it?"

Paul grimaced as he missed his stroke with the ax and ruined a roof shake. "In the woodshed. The men were too tired to go fooling around carrying it further, after ferrying it up the Snake River. And stop grumbling! You're lucky we had enough to pay barter for that job; I wouldn't fight the Snake for ten bulls and a tractor!"

"Lucky? Why do you think I picked the cargo for trade before I holed up? Why did I waste half my time getting you to study the agriculture books I took with me? Luck! D'you think I couldn't see what was coming? Though I never thought you'd pick a godforsaken place like this. Now if I—"

"Sure," Paul interrupted him. "I know, you'd have rediscovered the Garden of Eden, with railroads! When you find better land, a safer place, or one where the people are half as well back to normal, I'll go with you. It only took me two years to find this…Your junk is in the woodshed, Dad!"

Justin grunted and then went hurrying off, muttering something about darned impertinence, while Harry looked up with a doubtful frown. "Shouldn't talk that way to your dad, Paul. After all, he did fix it up a blame sight better for you than most of us got. Someday you'll probably own all Idaho, soon's we get a little further. Right now, we gotta farm any which way, but at least you know better. Runnin' away from the fightin' don't make the rest of us much shakes at it."

"Yeah, I know, Harry, but…Let's get up on the roof. We have more than enough here to patch it."

They were halfway up the ladder when a series of piercing screams from the woodshed culminated in a final whoop, and the figure of Justin came boiling out toward them. Paul sighed wearily, motioned Harry on up, and began climbing down to face the fury. Peace, it was wonderful! Not only did the old man do no work, when every hand was bitterly needed, but it was becoming impossible for others to work around him.

"All right, what is it?" he asked as he stepped through the door into which his father had retreated again.

"Look. Ruined! Absolutely ruined! I packed that typewriter myself, and now look at it!"

It was a sight, all right. Aside from a broken frame, twisted keys, and a thoroughly mangled mess of levers and wires, it bore almost no resemblance to a typewriter. "If I ever get my hands on your porters! Boiling in oil—hot lead in their boots—I'll fry them…The only typewriter I had, and look at it!"

The corner of the boy's lip twisted down, but he chuckled grimly at his father's rage. "If you want to swim down the Snake after them, go ahead. But it'd probably do more good to do your writing by hand."

"What!" Justin stopped at the top of his shriek, closed his mouth, and with the obviously masterful control needed in handling children, forced his voice to be reasonable. "We'll have to get another. Boise has been picked over, but I understand it escaped the worst, and nobody was looking for typewriters. You'll drive me to Boise tomorrow and we'll dig till we find one."

He swung back into the woodshed and began sorting through his other belongings, while Paul headed back toward the barn and the common sense of Harry. That last request, when the fields needed spraying and cultivating, would be too thick for even Raessler to swallow. Nuts to Boise!

But surprisingly, Harry took a different view of the matter. He screwed his face into thoughtfulness and rolled a cigarette before answering, but his tone was acquiescent when the words finally came. "Better go ahead, Paul. When a witch wants machinery, maybe it's a good idea he should get it."

"A what?"

"A witch—feller that goes in for hexin' and magic; like them that useta put ghosts out to fight against the soldiers. No, that's right, you wouldn't know about it—you wasn't here. Anyhow, people roundabouts figger your dad's a witch. Mighty handy thing to have on your side, witches. You'd best drive him in; I'll spray the potatoes and Gerda'll help, maybe."

"Magic is bunk," Paul told him sourly. "Your ghosts were probably some crude form of invisibility. I didn't learn too much of the old science, but I know enough not to believe in such things. And I'm not going to Boise. Come on, let's finish the roof before it gets too hot up here."

Gerda had enough to do without spraying potatoes, and Harry was already doing more than his share of the work. If Justin wanted to waste time, let him do it alone.

There was no wind in Boise, and the sweat was rolling down Paul's face as he dropped into the shade of the wagon and began unwrapping the lunch Gerda had fixed. Justin picked through a few more bits of rubble, then joined him. For once, the older man was doing more than his share, and he was tired enough to swallow three bites of his sandwich before he gagged and spat.

"Sour butter! I told Gerda no butter—dry, like her bread!"

"So you pick on my sandwiches; yours are in the other bag. And Gerda's a darned good cook." Paul washed his sandwich down with the warm, bitter home brew and studied the rubble of the former city with a large measure of doubt. "This has been picked dry, and we haven't the faintest idea where to look. Pure luck turned up that can of ANTU; if it'll kill rats as you say, it pays for the trip. But we won't find anything else. Why not give up?"

"Because I haven't found a typewriter! What's that?"

Paul shook his head and handed the little thing over. "Search me. I hoped you'd know some use for it. Funny-looking can."

"Umm. Magnetronic memory relay, looks like, under the dirt. Uh-huh, it is." Justin regarded it doubtfully, started to throw it away, and then gazed at it with new interest. "Know what that is, or have you forgotten?"

From somewhere in his memory, Paul dredged up the general idea. Science had stumbled on it accidentally, shortly after magnetic current was rediscovered and put to use. A colloidal suspension of metals in silicon jelly was provided with nodes; then connecting any two nodes would create a conducting, permanent link in the jelly, just as two related facts cause a permanent and reusable link between brain cells. It could be taught by experience, after a fashion, since the linkages became increasingly more conductive with use. It had proven quite satisfactory in replacing telephone relays.

Justin nodded. "And adding machines. This is a double ten-node affair, so that's what it came from. Mostly, all business machines were sold in the same place, so I hope you're bright enough to remember where you found it."

It took them less than half an hour to sink the hole behind the wagon an additional six feet through the soft trash. Justin's pick broke into the concrete first, and there was nothing weak about his attack on a four-foot circle; the boy's arms were aching from pulling the stuff out when the cement finally broke. His father disappeared in a shower of agonized curses and dust!

"Woof..." There was a fine vigor to his swearing, so no damage could have been done, and a second later the older man's head appeared below. "Come on, we hit a cellar they missed. Stinks, but the air's clearing. Throw me the lantern...Umm, two cellars, wooden framing cracked open between. Ladder over here ought to reach if I can get it through the hole."

But Paul wasted no time waiting for ladders. He'd seen the rake sticking out a packing box, and the ax bits spilled from another frame of rotting wood. Axes and rakes! Another box fell open, revealing useless pick handles, but a half-rotted shelf was stacked with the incalculable treasure of a hardware store's supplies. Not much, since the cellar seemed to have felt the edge of an energy beam—but enough to bring him to a speechless halt as he groped for realization of their luck.

Justin grumbled, seeing nothing to interest him. The crumbling section of wooden partition broke through with a few strokes of his pick, and he was climbing through. Paul came in answer to his yell, but there was nothing except tiers of rotted paper and big books of some kind. Then his father jumped from an alcove and pointed to a stretch of ruined, earth-packed tunnel under the overlying concrete layer, running along the wooden partition.

"Used to be a stationery supply and business machine store over this. See that box? One of the adding machines the gadget came from. No good without magnetic generators, but if we dig that out..."

Paul turned back to his treasures. "You dig it out. If I have time after I load the other stuff, I'll come and help; though I can't see much chance in that mess. Unless you'd take time out to help load?" But as usual, Justin's idea of co-operation was to follow his own interests, and the sound of the pick and shovel went on while Paul rigged a block and tackle to raise the loot. He loaded the wagon by himself, sweating over the inefficient hoist, and came back to find there was nothing else to be gleaned, even though he explored into the hard-packed dirt with his pick.

"Paul, you lazy loafer, quit goldbricking and give me a hand!" His father was practically dancing in the hole between basements, his lips caked with sweat and dirt, but his voice as imperious as ever.

At the moment, though, Paul was too well pleased to let even that irritate him, and he followed the other through the twisting, dangerous tunnel, to come up against an opened box that held what was obviously a typewriter, and a sound one.

"Old keyboard, useless," Justin said, as he stooped to get his hands under it. "Dvorak keyboard was standard for fifty years, and they still made these things. Darned reactionaries. The good one's just beyond, see! Now if you…Ugh! Wheeo! I'll drag it out, and then there's another crate on your side of the partition—just machinery, but I can use it. Here! Or can you slide it along by yourself?"

"Maybe. Yeah, I guess so…Oof! Maybe we'd better break it open and leave the crate."

"And lose half the pieces when it opened? Nonsense!" The old man grunted his way over the worst of the tunnel, saving his breath for cursing judiciously, until they were back to floor level. "May be more stuff here—at least it's one of the few unbeamed places the ruin pickers missed. When we get this up, you load it, and I'll cover our tracks. Then maybe, if you stop raising damnfool objections to your father's better judgment, I'll tell you why I had to have a typewriter. I'd have done it years ago if you hadn't been so infernally curious."

But Paul was listening with only half his mind when the work was done and he took his place beside the two cows that were both draft and milk animals. His father was seated on the big crate, with his precious typewriter in his hands, almost at peace with the world, and the wagon's converted truck wheels jumped and wobbled over the ruins that had been a road leading homeward. His mind was far more concerned with the load than with the story.

Stripped of justification, exaggeration, and distortion, it was simple enough. His father had apparently had a typist copying his dictated material, and the normal errors—or abnormal ones, as he told it—had led to a fight. There had been a lawsuit, another fight, a broken arm for the typist, and an injunction for Justin to cease and desist from slandering the typist by insisting a machine could do better work. It was all highly colorful and complicated, but it had ended with the old man swearing that he would build such a machine, and setting out to do so.

"And now, by the Lord Harry, with a decent typewriter, I'm going to prove for once and for all that he was just what I called him. Paul, you're going to see the typing an editor would appreciate. No errors, no erasures, no misspellings, and no passages left out! I'll finish the novel, and finish it right!"

Paul chuckled. "You mean you spent twenty years on that—all the time and trouble on the Island? Yeah, you would, though I'll admit it's probably why we're alive today. Too bad more people weren't rich enough to get out as you did."

"Rich and *smart* enough, don't forget," Justin corrected him with relative gentleness. His triumph was still strong upon him. "And if they had, they'd have taken the trouble along with them. You get a hundred people and you have an administration; get that and it bogs down till it has to join the war to cover itself up! Sure I spent twenty years—I'd have spent a thousand, if I had them. I told him I'd prove he was everything I said, and I will!"

"Hardly, Justin. He's dead. You might look for his heirs, but I don't think you'd have much luck—not even in twenty more years. Haw, Bessy!" He guided the cows over a hole in the road, noting their complaining, but deciding that they could wait three more hours for milking, probably. Might have to waste a little in partial milking, but they were more than halfway home.

Justin's peal of triumph cut through his thoughts and brought his mind back to his father. "Think I'm a fool, Paul? I told you I wasn't one of your lily-livered modern nincompoops! The swine had a daughter—wonderful girl, son, wonderful; appreciated me! No, I won't have any trouble finding his heir. You're it!"

Paul shook his head, but he joined in the old man's laughter. For a moment he could feel a distorted form of the old awe for his father, though he knew the situation was ridiculous. Maybe Justin was a witch; at least, the whole Boise affair smacked of miracles. But witch or not, he was the only one of his kind!

Harry Raessler seemed to agree, as he took one look at the laden wagon and began hitching up their other two cows while most of it was unloaded. Definitely a witch, and a remarkable one! If Mr. Ehrlich would come along, maybe they'd have the good luck to find the stock traders he'd heard about still around, and even get a fairly good bargain. Gerda came out and smiled shyly, assuring the old man that there was no butter on the supper she had packed for him, and everything was sweetness and light.

Of course, it couldn't last. A heavy rain caught Harry and Justin returning, and ruined all plans to dig in Boise by making the roads impassable. Their triumphant acquisition of the entire stock of the traders—a bull, three horses, and a few hogs and chickens—lost some of its pleasures when the stallion proved to have killer instincts and the two half-starved mares proved to be completely unbroken. Then in the morning, Justin had developed a case of sniffles, and discovered that the cream for his barley-coffee was turning sour! Everything came back to normal with a thump. Gerda retired to the kitchen in tears and Paul packed his father to his room with words he half regretted, half wished had been stronger.

Now Harry came back over the field and cut into his thoughts with a dark look at the clouds forming overhead. "Might as well get back, Paul. No use sprayin' when it's gonna rain. Well, we need it, though why it can't be spread out more even..."

"Yeah. You might ask my father; he's the expert on contrariness." Paul had begun to forget under the back-breaking pumping of the sprayer, but it all came back as they headed for the house. "Umm, what'd the man from Payette want? You were arguing over an hour."

"Wanted to buy our wrecked mower, to fix up one they found. I been holdin' out for a better offer, but now, we don't need anything they got—so I'm tradin' a couple of crosscut saws and some ax bits for theirs. Heck, with that we can get swap-help from the whole section, a week's work for a day's mower use...And Paul, don't you go forgettin' it was your dad got us all that. He don't owe us one hour's work. I told you a witch was a good thing to have."

"He owes Gerda a civil tongue! Dammit, I don't mind too much doing his work, even without our sudden luck. But I can't stand his taking his spite out on you two."

"Yeah. It's kinda tough on her, what with the kid comin' and all. But mostly, she's glad he's here. We're gettin' too rich, and most likely the rumor's gettin' spread around. Bandits hear that, and you wake up dead some night—unless they know you've got a witch, then they stay plenty far away...Go on in, I'll unhitch the cows." The rain was beginning to fall, but they had already reached the barn, and the machine-gun sound of a typewriter drifted toward them. Harry cocked an ear toward it, with the awe of a man who could only read by spelling out the words, but he made no comment.

Paul was slightly surprised at the speed of the typing, himself, as he entered the house and began the slow filing of an adjustable slide for what might eventually be a hand corn-planter. His father must have developed some trick of pre-typing on a correctable tape that could be fed in finished form into the typewriter; no human fingers could move that rapidly. It was ingenious, but hardly worth twenty years of work; any engineer would have scorned wasting a week on it! And he'd thought his father was a scientist!

Still, even that might have been justified if the book had been some new mathematical theory that would necessitate almost impossible accuracy and freedom from typographical errors. Instead, it was to be a novel—a romantic, swashbuckling novel of the kind popular before the war, when there were still publishing houses and people with leisure to devote to escape mechanisms.

Paul gritted his teeth and forced himself to relax his pressure on the file before he ruined the slide. He'd seen real scientists in his two years of life as a wandering trader. There was old Kinderhook and Gleason, working with young Napier during the few hours when they were not slaving for their existence in the fields. They were fighting a losing battle, but at least they were fighting. And somehow, with month-long calculations a machine could have performed in seconds, they were bringing the old, involved theories down to a level where they might possibly be handled with the scanty materials remaining. While such men were attempting miracles with no resources, his father sat comfortably dictating a stupid, anachronistic novel!

But the rapid typing had become sporadic, now that he listened again, and there was a mutter of cursing, followed by a brief burst of typing, and a yell. "Paul! Paul!" He climbed to his feet with a disgusted sigh and went toward the room before the other could come storming out to disturb the whole household. "Yeah, what is it this time?"

His father stood in the middle of the floor before a complicated mess of machinery. There was a small wood fired steam boiler and engine, set up on flat rocks and puffing smoke out the window, a humming dynamo, and the typewriter, all connected to a squat black box with tiny arms over the type keys and an arm bent up near the platen. Justin shook his fists impotently at the box.

"Ruined, d'you hear, ruined! If I had a boat, I'd find those idiot porters! Twenty years of work, and the misbegotten—"

Paul grunted wearily. "And if I had a boat, I'd let you go chasing down the Snake after them. What the deuce is this mess?"

"This mess," his father told him with heavy sarcasm, "is a voice-operated typewriter—and one that works! Or did work! Not like the hundred tons of junk the Institute had that couldn't punctuate or separate homonyms—or be operated by more than a single trained speaker. My Vocatype worked, until it was shipped here. Now it's ruined!"

In spite of himself, the boy was impressed, though he couldn't be sure without testing whether by the achievement or the mere claim to it. He picked up the microphone, slid in paper, pressed the button, and spoke quick words into the machine. "The mill wright could not attend the sacred rite, but he could write the right letter to right the false impression. Two apples fell to the ground, too rapidly. The man with the bow had to bow to the queen."

There were no mistakes!

"But a billion relays…" And the box couldn't weigh over a hundred pounds! He stood frozen in wonder, waiting for his father's explanation. This time he gave the account full attention, even to the boasting.

The voice analyzer and key magnets were old stuff, as were the scanning eyes to detect failure from the typewriter and the transformer that changed electricity into magnetic current. The rest was as simple as its theory was complex. A thousand-node magnetronic memory tube of his father's own construction occupied a little corner of the box and did the real work. Between its nodes, half a million links could be formed, serving as nodes for over a hundred billion sub-links that broke down to quintillions of sub-sub-links. It was of unusual size and complexity, but it had taken only a few months to build.

The rest of the long years had been spent in pronouncing words and striking keys until the tube developed a conditioned reflex for every one of the words in the abridged dictionary and could begin the seemingly hopeless task of learning to choose between alternate forms and somehow find a pattern of punctuation that worked. No normal man would have believed it possible, and only the stubbornest man in the world would have kept trying until success crowned his Herculean labors.

"Now it's ruined," Justin finished, and the attention and surprise of his son must have mollified his anger, for there was only bitterness left in his voice. He picked up a sheet of his shorthand notes and began dictating, while the machine raced along slightly behind him. "'…as sure as my name's Patrick Xenophon…' Look! Read that! '…as sure as my name's Patrick Xavier…!' Twenty times I've said Xenophon and twenty times it's written Xavier. All my conditioning of its reflexes ruined—all to be done over! No knowing how many other errors it contains now!"

Paul scratched the letters off the page with the point of his knife, and filed in the proper ones by hand typing. "That wouldn't occur to you, I suppose," he began, when a click from the machine called his eyes back. It had tossed the sheet out, inserted a fresh one, and begun typing the page again. When it finished, its original version was back before them!

Justin stared at his creation for long moments in horrified surprise, while his shoulders drooped slowly. Then, with a broken sound, he handed over the pages of his notes and finished copy and moved quietly out of the room. Moments later, Paul saw him moving slowly through the rain down the path to the barn, with Gerda at his heels.

And the girl was smiling!

Paul looked from the machine to their retreating forms and down at the pages he held. Then he dropped limply into the chair.

Gerda came in hours later to force his supper on him and light the lamp, but he only grunted his thanks, and went on reading. Surprisingly, it was a marvelous piece of escape literature, masterfully written. Once the words on the first page had penetrated his dazed mind, continuing was as inevitable as breathing. In a way, it was a pity it could never be published; the need of really effective escapism had never been greater.

And it was effective, in a strangely soothing way. At first he had meant to stop after the first chapter, but by then he knew the need of the relaxation it afforded, and he went on, letting the real world around him disappear from his mind. Besides, if its writing had meant twenty years of work for its creator, there should be at least one person who could get some good out of it!

He put down the last page and went over to the machine, where the unfinished book ended. "'…as sure as my name's Patrick Xavier…'" Patrick Xavier O'Malley, it should have been—or Patrick Xenophon…

"Justin! Hey, Justin!" His bellow was almost the equal to his father's usual cry, but he had no chance to think of the similarity. When the door opened, his finger was already on the passage, and shaking it under the older man's eyes. "You did name him Xavier, not Xenophon! Look at page four!"

Justin took one startled look at the page and picked up the microphone. This time there was no hesitation as the Vocatype followed his words to the end of the page and kicked out the finished product.

Then he chuckled.

"Sometimes I almost think I'm stubborn, Paul. I'd have sworn I was right, so I didn't think of checking. Do you realize what this means—a machine that is designed to take dictation, but won't do it unless the dictation is consistent with its facts? Why, it's a perfect secretary. Teach it a little mathematics and think of the errors it would save when writing up a piece of research. Paul, for once you've actually made yourself useful!"

The boy opened his mouth to answer that, but Justin gave him no chance. He was caressing the machine and fairly burbling.

"Now we can finish the book," he told it, and gave it another affectionate pat. "Nice machine—excellent machine! We'll show him that his grandfather was a bigoted moron yet! By the way, boy, how was the yarn?"

"Perfect," Paul answered, and swung out of the room and toward his bed without trusting himself to further insanity. Only his father could have invented such an impossibility as a machine capable of showing the rudiments of intelligence. And only Justin would have used it to finish a romance that could never be published.

But as he crawled between the sheets, he was less sure of his father's misuse of it. Perhaps, somewhere in its mysterious sub-linkages it contained potential intelligence, but it could never be made available in their lifetimes. Thought is useless without a medium of communication, and while it could learn facts, language is a protoplasmic by-product, filled with such abstract and fact-confusing variables as truth or goodness.

He dreamed of standing on a cliff while a blind man offered him a shiny new robot, if he could only describe green and orange.

It was barely dawn when Justin's hand on his shoulder roused him, and for a moment he thought he was still on the Island. Reality came back, though, as he groped for his overalls. His father's eyes were red with lack of sleep, but filled with a gamut of emotions.

Justin broke the silence in a voice that was more gentle than he had used for years.

"I know what you think of me, Paul, but I never forgot the real world. Knowing I'd fail, I fought for decency as few men have ever fought, and it wasn't until the last minute that I fled…No, let me tell it my way… Integrating the administration of an advanced technological world is inconceivably complex—even the men doing the job have only a vague idea of how complex! The broad policies depend on the results of lesser departments, and so on through fifty stages, vertically and in untold horizontal subdivisions. Red tape isn't funny; it's necessary and horrible. Complication begets complication, and that begets disconnection from reality. Mistakes are made; no one can see and check them in time, and they lead to more errors, which lead to war.

"For a while, they fight against it. And then they simply fight! I did all I could, and I failed. On the Island, there was nothing to do about it, so I built the Brain. Here, why should I struggle to re create the old vicious cycle that will wind up with the whole race wiped out? I tried to prepare you, but I couldn't prepare myself for this."

"If you'd explained..." Paul began weakly, but his father brushed it aside, and went on.

"But now something can be done. Government can work. All it needs is a brain to handle the red tape—not better, but more complicated than human brains—a few tremendous minds with perfect memories to hold the multitudinous interlocking correlated compartments. Let men make the decisions, but let robot brains free men to do it wisely—and move instantly, where red tape would take years! Paul, we'll give them the brains."

"No, Dad," the boy said softly, and cursed the inherited stubbornness that refused to leave his father in the newfound fantasy world. "Maybe someday, they'll have those brains, and you'll be responsible. But not in our time. You taught me enough semantics to know just how impossible the job of giving your gadget even a shadowy knowledge of words is going to be."

There was no sign of disappointment on the old man's face. It stiffened, and the perverse stubbornness reappeared, but he made no answer. Instead, he motioned his son after him and went silently across to the Vocatype room. On the machine was a little slip of paper, and there were other bits under the readjusted scanning eyes. "The trouble is, you think knowing that electricity works a motor is science, Paul. It isn't. Science is the process of reducing all things to their lowest common denominator and building systematically from there. I had the training before I turned novelist, and I still have it. I didn't waste the night dreaming. Check that list of words while you watch." Justin handed the slip over, and began arranging pieces of colored paper under the eyes of the scanner.

"What?" he asked as the machine sprang to humming life. "What?" Fresh paper fed into the typewriter, and the words came slowly: "A blue triangle and a red circle are on a white square. A black circle is on a what? What?"

"Hexagon," Justin answered quietly.

"A black circle is on a hexagon. The hexagon is orange. What color is orange? The hexagon is orange? What color is orange?"

Paul's startled eyes narrowed as he stared at the blue sheet of paper. "Orange isn't listed among the words!"

"Of course not—I never taught it to the Brain. But it pulled the same trick on me before I woke you up." The old man pressed the microphone button and addressed the machine. "Orange is the color of the hexagon. The hexagon is orange. What color is orange?"

The keys clicked. Then the page ripped out and a new one was inserted. With no further stalling, words began spilling onto the paper:

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>
> had to be true; the fact was as certain as the axioms of geometry, or the basics of physics. Invariably, a mixture of red and yellow is orange.

It skipped a space and added another line. "The hexagon is red and yellow. The hexagon is orange. What color is the hexagon?"

"Orange. Red and yellow make orange," Justin assured the doubtful machine, and shut it off. "You see, it has a perfect memory, as well as a sense of analysis. And it would have to have some vague sense of word purpose to separate homonyms, as I see it now. Anyhow, I've already established the fuzzy distinction between 'a' and 'the,' so it may take years, but not centuries…And that's that for today. Let's see if we can find something to eat!"

Paul's brain was reeling giddily as he watched his father begin slicing the bread, but the broad plan was already crystallizing, and he had no doubt of its success. They'd have to get Gleason, Kinderhook, and Napier to join them here, where the newfound wealth would permit leisure for their all-important work. At first they would have to depend on swap-help, but as wealth created wealth, they could expand. The Brain could be turned into a calculator infinitely better than the older ones with a little teaching, since mathematics is an exact language. And with the materials they could somehow find now, the slow beginnings of science would provide still more wealth to build on.

They'd have to organize a community out of its present anarchy, so some could be assigned to farm and others to teach and to think. That would be hard in a world that had learned to shun all forms of government from bitter experience. But while the Brain was as yet no perfect administrative machine, it would be mighty magic among the superstitious people. His father could coach it and develop his reputation as a witch until the obvious advantages of organization made such deception useless.

Perhaps it would be better to keep the Brain a secret, though. But in any event, the knowledge and hope for the future it offered would make all the rest possible

"Um-hmm," Justin muttered around a mouthful of bread. "I think everything's going to be all right now, son. But when I see Gerda—"

And Paul's dream collapsed! It had been a nice illusion, but no stable future could be built on a hatred of sour butter. He swung toward his father, and his mouth was white and tense, so that the words had to be forced from his teeth. "I told you to let her alone, Justin! If I ever—"

"Umm. But you might take a look out the window and wait till I finish," the old man answered, and there was a grin on his lips. "While I was trying to figure out what was wrong with the Brain, I got around to unpacking that other crate I found on your side of the partition. Gerda and I had a time replacing the motor with a crank, but we made it."

Paul swallowed his rage slowly, and turned to look through the little pane of glass toward the barn. At first he saw only the bobbing back of Harry, but as the man stepped aside, the other thing became visible. Gerda apparently wanted to try her hand, for she was smiling as she began turning the crank. Two streams of liquid spurted into the waiting pails. The cream separator was working quite satisfactorily!

"As I was saying, before you interrupted, when I see Gerda..." Justin took another bite of the yellow-smeared bread and smacked his lips approvingly. "When I see her, I must compliment her on what she churned last night. Very nice. I never could stand sour butter!"

The Pipes of Pan

Beyond the woods on either side were kept fields and fertile farm land, but here the undergrowth ran down to the dirt road and hid the small plot of tilled ground, already overrun with weeds. Behind that, concealed by thicker scrub timber lay a rude log house. Only the trees around, that had sheltered it from the heavy winds, had kept it from crumbling long before.

Pan recognized the lazy retreat to nature that had replaced his strong worship of old. He moved carefully through the tangled growth that made way for him, his cloven hoofs clicking sharply on the stones. It was a thin and saddened god that approached the house and gazed in through a hole that served as a window.

Inside, Frank Emmet lay on a rude pallet on the floor, a bag of his possessions beside him. Across from him was a stone fireplace, and between the two, nothing. A weak hand moved listlessly, brushing aside the vermin that knew his sickness; perhaps they sensed that the man was dying, and their time was short. He gave up and reached for a broken crock that contained water, but the effort was too great.

"Pan!" The man's voice reached out, and the god stepped away from the window and through the warped doorway. He moved to the pallet and leaned over his follower. The man looked up.

"Pan!" Emmet's words were startled, but there was a reverent note in his labored voice, though another might have mistaken the god for a devil. The tangled locks of Pan's head were separated by two goat horns and the thin sharp face ended in a ragged beard that seemed the worse for the weather. Then the neck led down to a bronzed torso that might have graced Hercules, only to end in the hips and legs of a goat, covered with shaggy hair. Horror and comedy mingled grotesquely, except for the eyes, which were deep and old, filled now with pity.

Pan nodded. "You've been calling me, Frank Emmet, and it's a poor god that wouldn't answer the appeal of his last worshiper. All the others of your kind have deserted me for newer gods, and only you are left, now."

It was true enough. Over the years, Pan had seen his followers fall off and dwindle until his great body grew lean and his lordly capering among the hills became a slow march toward extinction. Now even this man was dying. He lifted the tired head and held the crock of water to Emmet's mouth.

"Thanks!" The man mulled it over slowly. "So when I'm gone, there's no others. If I'd a-known, Pan, I might have raised up kids to honor your name, but I thought there were others. Am I—?"

"Dying," the god answered. The blunt truth was easier than half-believed lies.

"Then take me outside, where the sun can shine on me."

Pan nodded and lifted him easily, bearing him out as gently as a mother might her child, but a spasm of pain shot over the man's face as Pan laid him down. The time was almost up, the god knew. From a pocket in his tattered loincloth he drew out a small syrinx, or pipe of seven reeds, and blew softly across it. A bird heard the low murmuring melody and improvised a harmony, while a cricket marked time in slow chirps.

Emmet's face relaxed slowly and one of his hands came out to lie on the hairy thigh. "Thanks, Pan. You've always been a good god to me, and I'm hoping you'll have good lu—"

The voice trailed away and disappeared into the melody of the syrinx. Pan rose slowly, drawing a last lingering note from it, dropped the arm over the still chest and closed the eyes. Nearby was a rusty spade, and the earth was soft and moist.

Pan's great shoulders drooped as he wiped the last of the earth from his hands. Experimentally, he chirped at the cricket, but there was no response, and he knew that the law governing all gods still applied. When the last of their worshipers were gone, they either died or were forced to eke out their living in the world of men by some human activity. Now there would be hunger to satisfy, and in satisfying it, other needs of a life among men would present themselves.

Apollo was gone, long since, choosing in his pride to die, and the other gods had followed slowly, some choosing work, some death. But they had at least the advantage of human forms, while he knew himself for a monster his own mother had fled from. But then, the modern clothes were more concealing than the ancient ones.

Inside the house he found Emmet's other clothes, more or less presentable, and a hunting knife and soap. Men were partial to their own appearance, and horns were a stigma among them. Reluctantly, he brought the knife up against the base of one, cutting through it. Pain lanced through him at first, but enough of his godhood remained to make the stumps heal over almost instantly. Then the other one, followed, and the long locks of his hair. He combed it out and hacked it into such form as he could.

As the beard came away he muttered ungodly phrases at the knife that took off skin with the hair. But even to his own eyes, the smooth-shaven face was less forbidding. The lips, as revealed, were firm and straight, and the chin was good, though a mark of different color showed where the beard had been.

He fingered his tail thoughtfully, touching it with the blade of the knife, then let it go; clothes could hide it, and Pan had no love for the barren spine that men regarded as a mark of superiority. The tail must stay. Shoes were another problem, but he solved it by carving wooden feet to fit them, and making holes for his hoofs. By lacing them on firmly, he found half an hour's practice enough to teach him to walk. The underclothes, that scratched against the hair on his thighs and itched savagely, were another factor he had no love for, but time might improve that.

Hobbling about in the rough walk his strange legs necessitated, he came on a few pieces of silver in another broken crock and pocketed them. From the scraps of conversation he had heard, work was hard enough for men to find, and he might need this small sum before he found occupation. Already hunger was creeping over him, or he guessed it was hunger. At least the vacuum in his stomach was as abhorrent to him as to nature. Heretofore, he had supped lightly on milk and honey as the mood suited him, but this was a man-sized craving.

Well, if work he must, work he would. The others had come to it, such as still lived. Ishtar, or Aphrodite, was working somewhere in the East as a nursemaid, though her old taste for men still cost her jobs as fast as she gained them. Pan's father, Hermes, had been working as a Postal Telegraph boy the last he'd seen of him. Even Zeus, proudest of all, was doing an electrician's work somewhere, leaving only Ares still thriving in full godhood. What his own talents might be, time alone would tell, but the rippling muscles of his body must be put to some good use.

Satisfied that there was no more he could do, he trotted out and plowed his way through the underbrush that failed to make way for him as it should have. He jingled the money in one pocket thoughtfully as he hit the road, then drew out the syrinx and began a reedy tune of defiance on it. Work there must be, and he'd find it.

It was less than half an hour later, but the god's feet were already aching in the tight boxes he had made for them, and his legs threatened to buckle under the effort it took to ape man's walk. He moved past the ugly square house and toward the barn where the farmer was unhitching his team.

"Handout or work?" The man's voice was anything but enthusiastic.

"I'm looking for work."

"Uh-huh. Well, you do look strong enough. Living near the city the way I do, I get a lot of fellows in here, figuring they can always work in the country. But their arms wouldn't make toothpicks for a jaybird. Know anything about farming?"

"Something." It was more in Demeter's line, but he knew something about everything that grew. "I'm not asking more than room and board and a little on the side."

The farmer's eyes were appraising. "You do look as if you'd seen fresh air, at that. And you're homely enough to be honest. Grab a-holt here, and we'll talk it over. I don't rightly need a man, but—Hey! Whoa, there!"

Pan cursed silently. His godhood was still clinging to him, and the horses sensed the urge to wildness that was so intimately a part of him. As his hands fell on the tugs, they reared and bucked, lunging against their collars. He caught at the lines to steady them, but they flattened back their ears and whinnied wildly. That was enough; Pan moved back and let the farmer quiet them.

"Afraid I can't use you." The words were slow and decisive. "I use a right smart amount of horseflesh here, and some people just don't have the knack with them; animals are funny that way—temperamental, you might call it. Easy, there, Nelly. Tried any other places?"

"All the other farms along the road; they're not hiring hands."

"Hm-m-m. Wouldn't be, of course. Bunch of city men. Think they can come out and live in the country and do a little farming on the side. If I had the money, I'd sell out and move somewhere where people knew what the earth was made for. You won't find any work around here." He slapped a horse on the withers and watched as it stretched out and rolled in the short grass. "Stay for lunch?"

"No." He wasn't hungry enough to need food yet, and the delay might cost him a job elsewhere. "Any sheepherding done around here?" As the god of the shepherds, it should come natural to him, and it was work that would be more pleasant than the tight closeness of the city.

"Not around here. Out West they have, but the Mexicans do all that. If you're a sheep man, though, that's why the horses didn't take to you; they hate the smell of sheep."

Again the limitations of a human life imposed themselves; instead of transporting himself to the sheepherding country in a night, he'd have to walk there slowly, or ride. "How much would it cost to go out West?"

"Blamed if I know. Seventy dollars, maybe more."

So that was out. It would have to be the city, after all, where the fetid stench of close-packed humans tainted the air, and their meaningless yammering beat incessantly in one's ears. "I guess I'll have to go on into town," he said ruefully.

"Might be best. Nowadays, the country ain't what it used to be. Every fool that fails in town thinks he can fall back on the country, and every boy we have that amounts to anything goes to the city. Machinery's cutting down the number of men we need, and prices are shot haywire, even when a mortgage doesn't eat up all we make. You traveling on Shank's mare?"

Pan nodded, and the other studied him again. "Uh-huh. Well, down the road a piece you'll see a brick house set away back from the road. Go in there and tell Hank Sherman I said you was a friend of mine. He's going into the city, and you ought as well ride. Better hurry, though."

Pan made his thanks hastily, and left. If memory served him right, the friendliness of the farmer was the last he'd see. In the cities, even in the old days, men were too busy with their own importance and superiority to bother with others. But beggars made ill choosers.

The god clumped down the hot sidewalk, avoiding the press of the one o'clock rush, and surveyed the signs thoughtfully. Food should come first, he guessed, but the prices were discouraging. One read:

BUSINESS MAN'S LUNCH
Blue plate special, $2.00

He cut away from the large street into an older part of the city, and found that the prices dropped steadily. Finally a sign that suited his pocketbook came into view, and he turned in, picking the only vacant booth. Now he was thankful for the time he'd believed wasted in studying men's ways.

The menu meant little to him. He studied it carefully, and decided that the safest course was to order one of their combinations. Fish—no, that was food for Poseidon. But the lamb plate looked better, and the price fell within his means. "Lamb," he ordered.

The waitress shifted her eyes from the man behind the counter and wrote it down in the manner of all waitresses who expect no tip from the customer. "Coffeetearmilk?" she asked. "Rollerwhiterrye?"

"Eh? Oh, milk and roll." Pan had a word for her type in several languages, and was tempted to use it. As a god—but he wasn't a god now, and men no longer respected their gods, anyway. The cashier eyed his clothes thoughtfully until he moved in irritation, jingling the few coins in his pocket. Then she went back to her tickets, flipping gum from one tooth to another in an abstract manner.

The food, when it came, was a soggy-looking mess, to him, but that was true of all human food, and he supposed it was good enough. At least the plate was better filled than those he had seen through the windows of the more expensive places, and Pan's appetite was immense. He stuffed half a roll in his mouth and chewed on it quickly.

Not bad; in fact, he might grow to like this business of eating. His stomach quieted down and made itself at home, while another half bun followed the first. As he started to pick up the cut of meat and swallow it, he caught the eyes of another diner, and rumbled unhappily. Should he know the sissies nipped off shavings with their knives and minced the food down? But he put the meat back on the plate and fell to as they did. It was best to ape them.

"Mind if I sit here, old-timer?" Pan looked up at a clean-cut young man. "The other booths are filled, you know."

Where the man sat was no business of his. The seat opposite him was vacant, and he motioned to it. "I didn't buy it, and your face isn't misshapen. Sit down."

The other grinned good-naturedly and inspected the menu. "Lamb any good?"

"Seems all right." He was no judge of food, naturally, but it wasn't burned, and he had seen no dirt on it. At least his stomach was satisfied. He cleaned the last of the gravy from his plate with a bun and transferred it to his mouth. "At least, it partly fills a man."

"O.K., lamb it is." This time the waitress showed more interest, and even brought water, a thing she'd neglected before. "Make it lamb, sugar. And a beer. How about you, stranger?"

"Eh?" Unless he was mistaken, that was an invitation, and a welcome one. It was long years since he'd had a chance to sample even the anemic brew of the modern world, but that had been none of his choosing.

"Have a beer?"

"Why not?" As an after-thought, he added an ungodlike thanks. The man was likable, he decided, though friendship among city men was not what he had expected. "You wouldn't know about work in this city, would you—uh?"

"Bob Bailey."

"Men call me Pan—or Faunus, sometimes."

"Tried the want ads yet, Pan—or the employment agencies?" Bailey pulled a folded paper from his pocket and handed it over. "There might be a job in the back there. What kind of work?"

"Whatever I can do." Pan began at the bottom and skimmed up the list from xylophone players to bartenders. "But nothing they have here. I'm supposed to be good at herding and playing the syrinx, but that's about all."

"Syrinx?" He inspected the instrument Pan held out, and amusement danced his eyes. "Oh, that. Afraid it wouldn't do, Mr. Faunus. You don't happen to play the clarinet?"

"Never tried it."

"Then you don't. I'm looking for someone who does, right now, for my band—Bob Bailey's Barnstormers. Ever heard of it? Well, you're not the only one. Since we lost the best darned clarinetist in the business, we've slipped plenty. Playing the third-rate spots now with the substitute we had to hire. He used to be on the Lady Lee Lullaby hour, and never got over it."

"Why not get a good one then?" The talk made little sense to the god, but the question seemed obvious.

"Where? We get plenty of applicants—there's an ad in there now. But they'd either soothe the jitterbugs to sleep or rattle the strings off the dog house. Not a good clear tone in the bunch. All the good guys are signed up, or starting their own outfits."

They finished the beers and Pan counted out the amount marked on his ticket, estimating the length of time his remaining money would last; two days, maybe, by going half-hungry. He grunted. "Where are these employment agencies you mentioned?"

"One just down the street. It's a United States' employment center, so they won't try to rob you. Good luck, Faunus."

"And to you. My thanks for the beer." Then they separated, and Pan headed down the street toward the mecca of the jobless. The ads had all called for training of some sort, but there must be other work in this town that needed no previous experience. Perhaps meeting two friendly men in one day was a good omen. He hoped so.

The girl at the desk, when he finally found the right division, looked as bored as had the waitress. Looking over the collection of people waiting, Pan felt she had more reason. There were the coarsened red faces of professional sots, the lackluster stares of men whose intelligence ranked slightly below the apes, and the dreary faces of people who struggle futilely for a life that brings nothing but death to break its monotony.

But there were others there who looked efficient and purposeful, and these were the ones Pan feared. They had at least some training, some experience, and their experience was better than his. Surely the preference would go to them, and even as a minority, there were still many of that type there.

He studied the applicants and strained his ears to familiarize himself with the questions asked, holding down his impatience as best he could. But the machine ground slowly on, and his time finally came, just as the hot fetid air was becoming unbearable. "Your name," said the girl studying him impersonally.

"Pan—Pan Faunus."

Many strange names had passed over the desk to her, and her expression remained the same. "Middle name?"

"Uh…Sylvanus." The Romans had done him a good turn in doubling up on their names for him though he preferred the Greek.

"Address?"

For a moment, that stumped him. Then he gave the address of the restaurant, figuring that he might be able to arrange with the cashier to accept any mail that came there; he'd heard another man talking of that scheme while he waited, and it was as good as any.

"Age?"

"Seven thou—*ulp!* Forty-five." Since a pack of lies were needed of him, they might as well be good ones. "Born June 5, 1912."

There were more questions, and at some of his answers the girl looked up sharply, but his wits had always been good, and he passed the test with some fair success. Then came what he had been dreading.

"Experience and type of work?"

"General work in the country," he decided. "No trade, and I can't give references, since my former foll—employer is dead."

"Social Security Number?"

"Eh?" He had been hearing that asked of the applicants, but it still meant nothing to him. "I don't have one."

"Sorry." She nodded. "Naturally you wouldn't, as a farmhand. You'll have to have a card, though. Get that as soon as you find work."

Finally it was done, and he was sent into a cubbyhole where a man asked more questions and made marks on a piece of paper. Some of his answers were true: Hermes was his father, at least. Even that questioning came to a final end that left him sweating and cursing the underclothes that itched again in the hot room. The man leaned back and surveyed him.

"We haven't much of a job for you, Mr. Faunus. As a matter of fact, you'd probably do much better in the country where you came from. But—" he searched through his records—"this call just came in for an office boy, and they want someone of your age, for some reason. It pays only the minimum, but they didn't mention experience. Want to try it?"

Pan nodded emphatically and blessed the luck that had opened the job at precisely the right moment; he'd seen enough others turned away to know how small his chances were. He wasted no time in taking the little address slip and tracking the job to its lair.

Late afternoon found him less enthusiastic about the work. The air in the office was thick and stuffy, and there was an incessant thudding from the typewriters, jarring of comptometers, and the general buzz that men think necessary to business. He leaned over on the table, taking some of the ache from his tired feet and cursing the endless piles of envelopes that needed sealing and stamping.

This was work for a fool or one of the machines men were so proud of. Pick up an envelope, draw one finger under the flap to lift it, roll the flap over the wet roller. and close it with the other hand as it came off. Lift, roll, seal, lift, roll, seal. No wonder men shut themselves in tight houses, away from the good, clean winds and light of the sun; they were ashamed of what served for life among them, and with good reason.

But if it had to be done, he was willing to try. At first, the exultation of getting the work had served to keep his mind from it. Lying and deceit were not his specialty, and only a driving urge to adapt himself had made him use them to the extent that had been necessary. Now the men had put him on work that shriveled the mind, and did the muscles no good.

The old office boy came up to inspect his work, and Pan understood, looking at him, why the manager no longer wanted boys. The kid didn't know as yet that his job was being taken over, but thought he was in line for promotion, and was cocky enough for two. He seized the envelope rudely and ran it over the roller with a flourish.

"Awful dumb help they're sending out these days," he told the air. "Now I told you these had to go out tonight, and I find you loafing. Keep moving. You don't catch me laying down on the job. Ain't you never had work before?"

Pan looked at him, a side-long glance that choked off the kid's words, and fell to on the envelopes again. The air was getting the best of him. His head felt numb and thick, and his whole body was logy and dull. With what was supposed to be a chummy air, the boy sat his overgrown body on the desk and opened up his reservoir of personal anecdotes.

"Boy, you should 'a' been with me last night. Good-looking babes! Man! And boy, did they ever go for me! One little babe saw me work on the football team last year, and that didn't do me any harm. Best high school team in the state we had. You like football, guy?"

Pan's lips twitched. "No!" He redid an envelope that hadn't been properly moistened and reviewed the reasons for not committing mayhem on the boy. They were good reasons, but their value was depreciating with the passage of time in the stinking office, and with each new visit from the boy. The direct bluntness he longed to use came out a little in his voice, and the kid bounced off the table, scowling.

"O.K., don't let it get you. Hey, whatda you think stamps are? Don't tear them that way. Some of you hicks are ignorant enough to eat them."

The god caught himself on the table again, throbbing pains running through his head. There was a conference around the manager's desk and cigar smoke was being added to the thickness of the room. He groped out behind him for a stool, and eased himself down on it. Something sharp cut into him, and brought him up with a wild bellow!

The boy giggled. "Dawgone, I didn't think you'd fall for it. Oldest trick there is, and you still sat right down on that tack. Boy, you shoulda seen yourself."

Pan wasn't seeing himself, but he was seeing red. Homeric Greek is probably the most expressive of all languages, and his command of it included a good deal Homer had forgotten to mention. With a sharp leap, his head came down and his body jerked forward. He missed the horns, now, but his hard skull on the boy's midsection served well enough.

Sudden confusion ran through the office, and the manager rose quickly from his chair and headed toward the scene. Pan's senses were returning and he knew it was time to leave. The back door opened on an alley and he didn't wait to ask for directions.

The outer air removed the last traces of his temper and sobered him down, but there was no regret in his mind. What was done was done, and there was no room in his philosophy for regrets. Of course, word of it would get back to the employment agency, and he'd have no more jobs from them, but he wanted no more of such jobs. Maybe Apollo had the right idea in dying.

He made a slow meal in the restaurant, noting that Bailey was not there. He'd liked that young man. With a rush of extravagance, he bought a beer for himself and hung around, half waiting in hopes of Bailey's appearance and half planning for tomorrow; but nothing came of his plans.

Finally he got up and moved out into a little park across from the restaurant, just as darkness began to replace the twilight. Sleeping accommodations were the least of his worries. He found a large bush which concealed his body, and lay down on the ground under it. Sleep came quickly.

When he awoke, he found himself better for the sleep, though the same wasn't true of his clothes. He located his shoes and clamped his hoofs into them again, muttering dark thoughts about cobblers in general. If this kept up, he'd get bog spavins yet.

He made his way across to the restaurant again, where the waitress who was on at that hour regarded him with less approval than the other had. Out of the great pity of her heart, her actions said, she'd condescend to serve him, but she'd be the last to object to his disappearance. The sweet bun he got must have been well chosen for dryness.

"Hello there, old-timer." Bob Bailey's easy voice broke in on his gloom as the young man sat down opposite him. His eyes studied the god's clothes, and he nodded faintly to himself, but made no comment. "Have any luck yesterday?"

"Some, if you'd call it that." Pan related his fortunes shortly. Bailey grinned faintly.

"The trouble with you," Bailey said around a mouthful of eggs, "is that you're a man; employers don't want that. They want machines with self-starters and a high regard for so-called business ideals. Takes several years to inculcate a man with the proper reverence for all forms of knuckling under. You're supposed to lie down and take it, no matter how little you like it."

"Even empty fools who hold themselves better than gods?"

"That or worse; I know something about it myself. Stood all I could of a two-bit, white-collar job before I organized the Barnstormers."

Pan considered the prospect, and wondered how long it would take him to starve. "Slavery isn't what I'm looking for. Find your musician?"

"Not a chance. When they've got rhythm, they don't bother learning to play; and most of them don't have it. Smoke?"

Pan took the cigarette doubtfully, and mimicked the other's actions. He'd seen men smoking for centuries now, but the urge to try it had never come to him. He coughed over the first puff, letting out a bleat that startled the couple in the next booth, then set about mastering this smoke-sucking. Once the harsh sting of the tobacco was gone, there was something oddly soothing about it, and his vigorous good health threw off any toxic effect it might have had.

Bob finished his breakfast, and picked up the checks. "On me, Faunus," he said. "The shows should open in a few minutes. Want to take one in?"

Pan shook his head vigorously. The close-packed throng of humans in a dark theater was not his idea of a soothing atmosphere. "I'm going over to the park again. Maybe in the outdoor air, I can find some idea."

"O.K., we'll make it a twosome, if it's all right with you. Time to kill is about the only thing I have now." As he paid the checks, Pan noticed that the man's pocketbook was anything but overflowing, and guessed that one of Bailey's difficulties was inability to pay for a first-class musician.

They found a bench in the shade and sat down together, each thinking of his own troubles and mulling over the other's. It was the best way in the world of reeling miserable. Above them in a tree, a bird settled down to a high, bubbling little song and a squirrel came over to them with the faint hopes of peanuts clearly in its mind.

Pan clucked at it, making clicking sounds that brought its beady little eyes up at him quickly. It was a fat well-fed squirrel that had domesticated man nicely for its purposes, and there was no fear about it. When even the animals had learned to live with man and like it, surely a god could do as well.

He tapped his thighs slowly and felt the syrinx under his hand. The squirrel regarded him carefully as he drew it out, saw there was no bag of peanuts there, and started to withdraw. The first low notes blown from the reeds called it back, and it sat down on its tail, paws to its mouth in a rapt attitude that aped a critic listening to Bach.

Pan took courage, and the old bluff laughter fell from his lips. He lifted the syrinx again and began a wild quick air on the spur of the moment, letting the music roam through the notes as it would. There was no set tempo, but his feet tapped lightly on the graveled path, and the bird fell in step.

Bailey looked up quickly, his fingers twitching at the irregular rhythm. There was a wildness to it, a primitiveness that barely escaped savagery, and groped out toward man's first awareness of the fierce wild joy of living. Now the notes formed to a regular cadence that could be followed, and Bailey whistled an impromptu harmony. The squirrel swayed lightly from side to side, twitching his tail.

"Jitterbug, isn't he?" Bob asked, as Pan paused. "I've never seen music hit an animal that way before. Where'd you learn the piece?"

"Learn it?" Pan shook his head. "Music isn't learned—it's something that comes from inside."

"You mean you made that up as you went along? Whew! But you can play a regular tune, can't you?"

"I never tried."

"Uh. Well, here's one." He pursed his lips and began whistling one of the swingy popular things his orchestra played at, but never hit. Pan listened to it carefully, only half sure he liked it, then put the syrinx to his lips, beat his foot for time, and repeated it. But there were minor variations that somehow lifted it and set the rhythm bouncing along, reaching out to the squirrel and making its tail twitch frenziedly.

Bailey slapped him on the back, grinning. "Old-timer," he chuckled, "you've got the least to make it with that whistle, but when you hit it, you send. Man, I'd like to have the boys hear the way you take off on the bit and go supersonic."

Pan's face was blank, though the voice seemed approving. "Can't you speak English?"

"Sure. I'm telling you you're hot. Give the jitterbugs an earful of that and top-billing would follow after. Come on!"

Pan followed him, uncertain. "Where?"

"Over to the boys. If you can wrap your lips around a clarinet the way you do that thing, our worries are over. And I'm betting you can."

It was their last night's engagement at the Grotto a month later, and Pan stood up, roaring out the doggerel words in a deep rich basso that caught and lifted the song. Strictly speaking, his voice was a little too true for swing, but the boisterous paganism in it was like a beat note from a tuba, something that refused to permit feet to be still. Then it ended, and the usual clamor followed. His singing was a recent experiment, but it went over.

Bob shook hands with himself and grinned. "Great, Pan! You're hot tonight." Then he stepped to the microphone. "And now, for our last number, folks, I'd like to present a new tune for the first time ever played. It's called 'The Gods Got Rhythm,' and we think you'll like it. Words and music by Tin Pan Faunus, the Idol of the Jitterbugs. O.K., Tin Pan, take it!"

Pan cuddled the clarinet in his mouth and watched the crowd stampede out onto the floor. Bob winked at him, and he opened up, watching the dancers. This was like the rest, a wild ecstasy that refused to let them stay still. Primitive, vital, every nerve alive to the music. Even the nymphs of old had danced less savagely to his piping.

One of the boys passed a note over to his knee, and he glanced at it as he played. "Boys, we're set. Peterson just gave Bob the signal, and that means three months at the Crystal Palace. Good-bye blues."

Pan opened up, letting the other instruments idle in the background, and went in for a private jam session of his own. Out on the floor were his worshipers, every step an act of homage to him. Homage that paid dividends, and was as real in its way as the sacrifices of old; but that was a minor detail. Right now he was hot.

He lifted the instrument higher, drawing out the last wild ecstasy from it. Under his clothes, his tail twitched sharply, but the dancers couldn't see that, and wouldn't have cared if they had. Tin Pan Faunus, Idol of the Jitterbugs, was playing, and that was enough.

Though Dreamers Die

Consciousness halted dimly at the threshold and hovered uncertainly, while Jorgen's mind reached out along his numbed nerves, questing without real purpose; he was cold, chilled to the marrow of his bones, and there was an aching tingle to his body that seemed to increase as his half-conscious thought discovered it. He drew his mind back, trying to recapture a prenatal lethargy that had lain on him so long, unwilling to face this cold and tingling body again.

But the numbness was going, in spite of his vague desires, though his now opened eyes registered only a vague, formless light without outline or detail, and the mutterings of sound around him were without pattern or meaning. Slowly, the cold retreated, giving place to an aching throb that, in turn, began to leave; he stirred purposelessly, while little cloudy wisps of memory insisted on trickling back, trying to remind him of things he must do. Then the picture cleared somewhat, letting him remember scattered bits of what had gone before. There had been the conquest of the Moon and a single gallant thrust on to Mars; the newscasts had been filled with that. And on the ways a new and greater ship had been building, to be powered with his new energy release that would free it from all bounds and let it go out to the farthest stars, if they chose—the final attainment of all the hopes and dreams of the race. But there was something else that eluded him, more important even than all that or the great ship.

A needle was thrust against his breast and shoved inward, to be followed by a glow of warmth and renewed energy; adrenaline, his mind recognized, and he knew that there were others around him, trying to arouse him. Now his heart was pumping strongly, and the drug coursed through him, chasing away those first vague thoughts and replacing them with a swift rush of less welcome, bitter memories.

For man's dreams and man himself were dust behind him, now! Overnight all their hopes and plans had been erased as if they had never been, and the Plague had come, a mutant bacteria from some unknown source, vicious beyond imagination, to attack and destroy and to leave only death behind it. In time, perhaps, they might have found a remedy, but there had been no time. In weeks it had covered the Earth, in months even the stoutest hearts that still lived had abandoned any hope of survival. Only the stubborn courage and tired but unquenchable vigor of old Dr. Craig had remained, to force dead and dying men on to the finish of Jorgen's great ship; somehow in the mad shambles of the last days, he had collected this pitifully small crew that was to seek a haven on Mars, taking the five Thoradson robots to guide them while they protected themselves against the savage acceleration with the aid of the suspended animation that had claimed him so long.

And on Mars, the Plague had come before them! Perhaps it had been brought by that first expedition, or perhaps they had carried it back unknowingly with them; that must remain forever an unsolved mystery. Venus was uninhabitable, the other planets were useless to them, and the Earth was dead behind. Only the stars had remained, and they had turned on through sheer necessity that had made that final goal a hollow mockery of the dream it should have been. Here in the ship around him reposed all that was left of the human race, unknown years from the solar system that had been their home!

But the old grim struggle must go on. Jorgen turned, swinging his trembling feet down from the table toward the metal floor and shaking his head to clear it. "Dr. Craig?"

Hard, cool hands found his shoulder, easing him gently but forcefully back onto the table. The voice that answered was metallic, but soft. "No, Master Jorgen, Dr. Craig is not here. But wait, rest a little longer until the sleep is all gone from you; you're not ready yet."

But his eyes were clearing then, and he swung them about the room. Five little metal men, four and a half feet tall, waited patiently around him; there was no other present. Thoradson's robots were incapable of expression, except for the dull glow in their eyes, yet the pose of their bodies seemed to convey a sense of uncertainty and discomfort, and Jorgen stirred restlessly, worried vaguely by the impression. Five made an undefined gesture with his arm.

"A little longer, master. You must rest!"

For a moment longer he lay quietly, letting the last of the stupor creep away from him and trying to force his still-dulled mind into the pattern of leadership that was nominally his. This time Five made no protest as he reached up to catch the metal shoulder and pull himself to his feet. "You've found a sun with planets, Five? Is that why you wakened me?"

Five shuffled his feet in an oddly human gesture, nodding, his words still maddeningly soft and slow. "Yes, master, sooner than we had hoped. Five planetless suns and ninety years of searching are gone, but it might have been thousands. You can see them from the pilot room if you wish."

Ninety years that might have been thousands, but they had won! Jorgen nodded eagerly, reaching for his clothes, and Three and Five sprang forward to help, then moved to his side to support him, as the waves of giddiness washed through him, and to lead him slowly forward as some measure of control returned. They passed down the long center hall of the ship, their metal feet and his leather boots ringing dully on the plastic-and-metal floor, and came finally to the control room, where great crystal windows gave a view of the cold black space ahead, sprinkled with bright, tiny stars; stars that were unflickering and inimical as no stars could be through the softening blanket of a planet's atmosphere. Ahead, small but in striking contrast to the others, one point stood out, the size of a dime at ten feet. For a moment, he stood staring at it, then moved almost emotionlessly toward the windows, until Three plucked at his sleeve.

"I've mapped the planets already, if you wish to see them, master. We're still far from them, and at this distance, by only reflected light, they are hard to locate, but I think I've found them all."

Jorgen swung to the electron screen that began flashing as Three made rapid adjustments on the telescope, counting the globes that appeared on it and gave place to others. Some were sharp and clear, cold and unwavering; others betrayed the welcome haze of atmosphere. Five of them, the apparent size of Earth, were located beyond the parched and arid inner spheres, and beyond them, larger than Jupiter, a monster world led out to others that grew smaller again. There was no ringed planet to rival Saturn, but most had moons, except for the farthest inner planets, and one was almost a double world, with satellite and primary of nearly equal size. Planet after planet appeared on the screen, to be replaced by others, and he blinked at the result of his count. "Eighteen planets, not counting the double one twice! How many are habitable?"

"Perhaps four. Certainly the seventh, eighth, and ninth are. Naturally, since the sun is stronger, the nearer ones are too hot. But those farther are about the size of Earth, and they're relatively closer to each other than Earth, Mars, and Venus were; they should be very much alike in temperature, about like Earth. All of them show spectroscopic evidence of oxygen and water vapor, while the plates of the seventh show what might be vegetation. We've selected that, subject to your approval."

It came on the screen again, a ball that swelled and grew as the maximum magnification of the screen came into play, until it filled the panel and expanded so that only a part was visible. The bluish-green color there might have been a sea, while the browner section at the side was probably land. Jorgen watched as it moved slowly under Three's manipulation, the brown entirely replacing the blue, and again, eventually, showing another sea. From time to time, the haze of the atmosphere thickened as grayish veils seemed to swim over it, and he felt a curious lift at the thoughts of clouds and rushing streams, erratic rain, and the cool, rich smell of growing things. Almost it might have been a twin of Earth, totally unlike the harsh, arid home that Mars would have been.

Five's voice broke in, the robot's eyes following his over the screen. "The long, horizontal continent seems best, master. We estimate its temperature at about that of the central farming area of North America, though there is less seasonal change. Specific density of the planet is about six, slightly greater than Earth; there should be metals and ores there. A pleasant, inviting world."

It was. And far more, a home for the voyagers who were still sleeping, a world to which they could bring their dreams and their hopes, where their children might grow up and find no strangeness to the classic literature of Earth. Mars had been grim and uninviting, something to be fought through sheer necessity. This world would be a mother to them, opening its arms in welcome to these foster children. Unless—

"It may already have people, unwilling to share with us."

"Perhaps, but not more than savages. We have searched with the telescope and camera, and that shows more than the screen; the ideal harbor contains no signs of living constructions, and they would surely have built a city there. Somehow, I…feel—"

Jorgen was conscious of the same irrational feeling that they would find no rivals there, and he smiled as he swung back to the five who were facing him, waiting expectantly as if entreating his approval. "The seventh, then. And the trust that we placed in you has been kept to its fullest measure. How about the fuel for landing?"

Five had turned suddenly toward the observation ports, his little figure brooding over the pinpoint stars, and Two answered. "More than enough, master. After reaching speed, we only needed a little to guide us. We had more than time enough to figure the required approaches to make each useless sun swing us into a new path, as a comet is swung."

He nodded again, and for a moment as he gazed ahead at the sun that was to be their new home, the long wearying vigil of the robots swept through his mind, bringing a faint wonder at the luck that had created them as they were. Anthropomorphic robots, capable of handling human instruments, walking on two feet and with two arms ending in hands at their sides. But he knew it had been no blind luck. Nature had designed men to go where no wheels could turn, to handle all manner of tools, and to fit not one but a thousand purposes; it had been inevitable that Thoradson and the brain should copy such an adaptable model, reducing the size only because of the excessive weight necessary to a six-foot model.

Little metal men, not subject to the rapid course of human life that had cursed their masters; robots that could work with men, learning from a hundred teachers, storing up their memories over a span of centuries instead of decades. When specialization of knowledge had threatened to become too rigid and yet when no man had time enough even to learn the one field he chose, the coming of the robots had become the only answer. Before them, men had sought help in calculating machines, then in electronic instruments, and finally in the "brains" that were set to solving the problem of their own improvement among other things. It was with such a brain that Thoradson had labored in finally solving the problems of full robot-hood. Now, taken from their normal field, they had served beyond any thought of their creator in protecting and preserving all that was left of the human race. Past five suns and over ninety years of monotonous searching they had done what no man could have tried.

Jorgen shrugged aside his speculations and swung back to face them. "How long can I stay conscious before you begin decelerating?"

"We are decelerating—full strength." Two stretched out a hand to the instrument board, pointing to the accelerometer.

The instrument confirmed his words, though no surge of power seemed to shake the ship, and the straining, tearing pull that should have shown their change of speed was absent. Then, for the first time, he realized that his weight seemed normal here in space, far from the pull of any major body, where there should have been no weight in a condition of free fall. "Controlled gravity!"

Five remained staring out of the port, and his voice was quiet, incapable of pride or modesty. "Dr. Craig set us the problem, and we had long years in which to work. Plates throughout the ship pull with a balanced force equal and opposite to the thrust of acceleration, while others give seeming normal weight. Whether we coast at constant speed or accelerate at ten gravities, compensation is complete and automatic."

"Then the sleep's unnecessary! Why—" But he knew the answer, of course; even without the tearing pressure, the sleep had remained the only solution to bringing men this vast distance that had taken ninety years; otherwise they would have grown old and died before reaching it, even had their provisions lasted.

Now though, that would no longer trouble them. A few hours only separated them from the planets he had seen, and that could best be spent here before the great windows, watching their future home appear and grow under them. Such a thing should surely be more than an impersonal fact in their minds; they were entitled to see the final chapter of their exodus, to carry it with them as a personal memory through the years of their lives and pass that memory on to the children who would follow them. And the fact that they would be expecting the harshness of Mars instead of this inviting world would make their triumph all the sweeter. He swung back, smiling.

"Come along then, Five; we'll begin reviving while you others continue with the ship. And first, of course, we must arouse Dr. Craig and let him see how far his plan has gone."

Five did not move from the windows, and the others had halted their work, waiting. Then, reluctantly, the robot answered. "No, master. Dr. Craig is dead!"

"Craig—dead?" It seemed impossible, as impossible and unreal as the distance that separated them from their native world. There had always been Craig, always would be.

"Dead, master, years ago." There was the ghost of regret and something else in the spacing of the words. "There was nothing we could do to help!"

Jorgen shook his head, uncomprehending. Without Craig, the plans they had dared to make seemed incomplete and almost foolish. On Earth, it had been Craig who first planned the escape with their ship. And on Mars, after the robots brought back the evidence of the Plague, it had been the older man who had cut through their shock with a shrug and turned his eyes outward again with the fire of a hope that would not be denied.

"Jorgen, we used bad judgment in choosing such an obviously unsuitable world as this, even without the Plague. But it's only a delay, not the finish. For beyond, somewhere out there, there are other stars housing other planets. We have a ship to reach them, robots who can guide us there; what more could we ask? Perhaps by Centaurus, perhaps a thousand light-years beyond, there must be a home for the human race, and we shall find it. On the desert before us lies the certainty of death; beyond our known frontiers there is only uncertainty-but hopeful uncertainty. It is for us to decide. There could be no point in arousing the others to disappointment when someday we may waken them to an even greater triumph. Well?"

And now Craig, who had carried them so far, was dead like Moses outside the Promised Land, leaving the heritage of real as well as moral leadership to him. Jorgen shook himself, though the eagerness he had felt was dulled now by a dark sense of personal loss. There was work still to be done. "Then, at least, let's begin with the others, Five."

Five had turned from the window and was facing the others, apparently communicating with them by the radio beam that was a part of him, his eyes avoiding Jorgen's. For a second, the robots stood with their attention on some matter, and Five nodded with the same curious reluctance and turned to follow Jorgen, his steps lagging, his arms at his sides.

But Jorgen was only half aware of him as he stopped before the great sealed door and reached out for the lever that would let him into the sleeping vault, to select the first to be revived. He heard Five's steps behind him quicken, and then suddenly felt the little metal hands catch at his arm, pulling it back, while the robot urged him sideways and away from the door.

"No, master. Don't go in there!" For a second, Five hesitated, then straightened and pulled the man farther from the door and down the hall toward the small reviving room nearest, one of the several provided. "I'll show you—in here! We—"

Sudden unnamed fears caught at Jorgen's throat, inspired by something more threatening in the listlessness of the robot than in the unexplained actions. "Five, explain this conduct!"

"Please, master, in here. I'll show you—but not in the main chamber—not here. This is better, simpler—"

He stood irresolutely, debating whether to use the mandatory form that would force built-in unquestioning obedience from the robot, then swung about as the little figure opened the small door and motioned, eyes still averted. He started forward, to stop abruptly in the doorway.

No words were needed. Anna Holt lay there on the small table, her body covered by a white sheet, her eyes closed, and the pain-filled grimaces of death erased from her face. There could be no question of that death, though. The skin was blotched, hideously, covered with irregular brownish splotches, and the air was heavy with the scent of musk that was a characteristic of the Plague! Here, far from the sources of infection, with their goal almost at hand, the Plague had reached forward to claim its own and remind them that flight was not enough—could never be enough so long as they were forced to carry their disease-harboring bodies with them.

About the room, the apparatus for reviving the sleepers lay scattered, pushed carelessly aside to make way for other things, whose meaning was only partially clear. Obviously, though, the Plague had not claimed her without a fight, though it had won in the end, as it always did. Jorgen stepped backward, heavily, his eyes riveted on the corpse. Again his feet groped backward, jarring down on the floor, and Five was closing and sealing the door with apathetic haste.

"The others, Five? Are they—"

Five nodded, finally raising his head slightly to meet the man's eyes. "All, master. The chamber of sleep is a mausoleum now. The Plague moved slowly there, held back by the cold, but it took them all. We sealed the room years ago when Dr. Craig saw there was no hope."

"Craig?" Jorgen's mind ground woodenly on, one slow thought at a time. "He knew about this?"

"Yes. When the sleepers first showed the symptoms, we revived him, as he had asked us to do—our speed was constant then, even though the gravity plates had not been installed." The robot hesitated, his low voice dragging even more slowly. "He knew on Mars; but he hoped a serum you were given with the sleep drugs might work. After we revived him, we tried other serums. For twenty years we fought it, Master Jorgen, while we passed two stars and the sleepers died slowly, without suffering, in their sleep, but in ever increasing numbers. Dr. Craig reacted to the first serum, you to the third; we thought the last had saved her. Then the blemishes appeared on her skin, and we were forced to revive her and try the last desperate chance we had, two days ago. It failed! Dr. Craig had hoped…two of you—But we tried, master!"

Jorgen let the hands of the robot lower him to a seat and his emotions were a backwash of confused negatives. "So it took the girl! It took the girl, Five, when it could have left her and chosen me. We had frozen spermatozoa that would have served if I'd died, but it took her instead. The gods had to leave one uselessly immune man to make their irony complete! Immune!"

Five shuffled hesitantly. "No, master."

Jorgen stared without comprehension, then jerked up his hands as the robot pointed, studying the skin on the back. Tiny, almost undetectable blotches showed a faint brown against the whiter skin, little irregular patches that gave off a faint characteristic odor of musk as he put them to his nose. No, he wasn't immune.

"The same as Dr. Craig," Five said. "Slowed almost to complete immunity, so that you may live another thirty years, perhaps, but we believe now that complete cure is impossible. Dr. Craig lived twenty years, and his death was due to age and a stroke, not the Plague, but it worked on him during all that time."

"Immunity or delay, what difference now? What happens to all our dreams when the last dreamer dies, Five? Or maybe it's the other way around."

Five made no reply, but slid down onto the bench beside the man, who moved over unconsciously to make room for him. Jorgen turned it over, conscious that he had no emotional reaction, only an intellectual sense of the ghastly joke on the human race. He'd read stories of the last human and wondered long before what it would be like. Now that he was playing the part, he still knew no more than before. Perhaps on Earth, among the ruined cities and empty reminders of the past, a man might realize that it was the end of his race. Out here, he could accept the fact, but his emotions refused to credit it; unconsciously, his conditioning made him feel that disaster had struck only a few, leaving a world of others behind. And however much he knew that the world behind was as empty of others as this ship, the feeling was too much a part of his thinking to be fully overcome. Intellectually, the race of man was ended; emotionally, it could never end.

Five stirred, touching him diffidently. "We have left Dr. Craig's laboratory untouched, master; if you want to see his notes, they're still there. And he left some message with the brain before he died, I think. The key was open when we found him, at least. We have made no effort to obtain it, waiting for you."

"Thank you, Five." But he made no move until the robot touched him again, almost pleadingly. "Perhaps you're right; something to fill my mind seems called for. All right, you can return to your companions unless you want to come with me."

"I prefer to come."

The little metal man stood up, moving down the hall after Jorgen, back toward the tail of the rocket, the sound of metal feet matching the numb regularity of the leather heels on the floor. Once the robot stopped to move into a side chamber and come back with a small bottle of brandy, holding it out questioningly. There was a physical warmth to the liquor, but no relief otherwise, and they continued down the hall to the little room that Craig had chosen. The notes left by the man could raise a faint shadow of curiosity only, and no message from the dead could solve the tragedy of the living now. Still, it was better than doing nothing. Jorgen clumped in, Five shutting the door quietly behind them, and moved listlessly toward the little Fabrikoid notebooks. Twice the robot went quietly out to return with food that Jorgen barely tasted. And the account of

Craig's useless labors went on and on, until finally he turned the last page to the final entry.

"I have done all that I can, and at best my success is only partial. Now I feel that my time grows near, and what can still be done must be left to the robots. Yet, I will not despair. Individual and racial immortality is not composed solely of the continuation from generation to generation, but rather of the continuation of the dreams of all mankind. The dreamers and their progeny may die, but the dream cannot. Such is my faith, and to that I cling. I have no other hope to offer for the unknown future."

Jorgen dropped the notebook dully, rubbing his hands across his tired eyes. The words that should have been a ringing challenge to destiny fell flat; the dream could die. He was the last of the dreamers, a blind alley of fate, and beyond lay only oblivion. All the dreams of a thousand generations of men had concentrated into Anna Holt, and were gone with her.

"The brain, master," Five suggested softly. "Dr. Craig's last message."

"You operate it, Five." It was a small model, a limited fact analyzer such as most technicians used or had used to help them in their work, voice operated, its small, basic vocabulary adjusted for the work to be done. He was unfamiliar with the semantics of that vocabulary, but Five had undoubtedly worked with Craig long enough to know it.

He watched without interest as the robot pressed down the activating key and spoke carefully chosen words into it. "Subtotal say-out! Number n say-in."

The brain responded instantly, selecting the final recording impressed upon it by Craig and repeating in the man's own voice, a voice shrill with age and weariness, hoarse and trembling with the death that was reaching for him as he spoke. "My last notes—inadequate! Dreams can go on. Thoradson's first analysis—" For a second, there was only a slithering sound, such as a body might have made; then the brain articulated flatly: "Subtotal number n say-in, did say-out!"

It was meaningless babble to Jorgen, and he shook his head at Five. "Probably his mind was wandering. Do you know what Thoradson's first analysis was?"

"It dealt with our creation. He was, of course, necessarily trained in semantics—that was required for the operation of the complex brains used on the problem of robots. His first rough analysis was that the crux of the problem rested on the accurate definition of the word I. That can be properly defined only in terms of itself, such as the Latin cognate *ego*, since it does not necessarily refer to any physical or specifically definable part or operation of the individual. Roughly, it conveys a sense of individuality, and Thoradson felt that the success or failure of robots rested upon the ability to analyze and synthesize that."

For long minutes, he turned it over, but it was of no help in clarifying the dying man's words; rather, it added to the confusion. But he had felt no hope and could now feel no disappointment. When a problem has no solution, it makes little difference whether the final words of a man are coldly logical or wildly raving. The result must be the same. Certainly semantics could offer no hope where all the bacteriological skill of the race had failed.

Five touched his arm again, extending two little pellets toward him. "Master, you need sleep now; these—sodium amytal—should help. Please!"

Obediently, he stuffed them into his mouth and let the robot guide him toward a room fixed for sleeping, uncaring. Nothing could possibly matter now, and drugged sleep was as good a solution as any other. He saw Five fumble with a switch, felt his weight drop to a few pounds, making the cot feel soft and yielding, and then gave himself up dully to the compulsion of the drug. Five tiptoed quietly out, and blackness crept over his mind, welcome in the relief it brought from thinking.

Breakfast lay beside him, hot in vacuum plates, when Jorgen awoke finally, and he dabbled with it out of habit more than desire. Somewhere, during the hours of sleep, his mind had recovered somewhat from the dull pall that had lain over it, but there was still a curious suspension of his emotions. It was almost as if his mind had compressed years of forgetting into a few hours, so that his attitude toward the tragedy of his race was tinged with a sense of remoteness and distance; there was neither grief nor pain, only a vague feeling that it had happened long before and was now an accustomed thing.

He sat on the edge of his bunk, pulling on his clothes slowly and watching the smoke curl up from his cigarette, not thinking. There was no longer any purpose to thought. From far back in the ship, a dull drone of sound reached him, and he recognized it as the maximum thrust of the steering tubes, momentarily in action to swing the ship in some manner. Then it was gone, leaving only the smooth, balanced, almost inaudible purr of the main drive as before. Finished with his clothes, he pushed through the door and into the hallway, turning instinctively forward to the observation room and toward the probable location of Five. The robots were not men, but they were the only companionship left him, and he had no desire to remain alone. The presence of the robot would be welcome. He clumped into the control room, noting that the five were all there, and moved toward the quartz port.

Five turned at his steps, stepping aside to make room for him and lifting a hand outward. "We'll be landing soon, master. I was going to call you."

"Thanks." Jorgen looked outward then, realizing the distance that had been covered since his first view. Now the sun was enlarged to the size of the old familiar sun over Earth, and the sphere toward which they were headed was clearly visible without the aid of the scope. He sank down quietly into the seat Five pulled up for him, accepting the binoculars, but making no effort to use them. The view was better as a whole, and they were nearing at a speed that would bring a closer view to him soon enough without artificial aid.

Slowly it grew before the eyes of the watchers, stretching out before them and taking on a pattern as the distance shortened. Two, at the controls, was bringing the ship about in a slow turn that would let them land to the sunward side of the planet where they had selected their landing site, and the crescent opened outward, the darkened night side retreating until the whole globe lay before them in the sunlight. Stretched across the northern hemisphere was the sprawling, horizontal continent he had seen before, a rough caricature of a running greyhound, with a long, wide river twisting down its side and emerging behind an outstretched foreleg. Mountains began at the head and circled it, running around toward the tail, and then meeting a second range along the hip. Where the great river met the sea, he could make out the outlines of a huge natural harbor, protected from the ocean, yet probably deep enough for any surface vessel. There should have been a city there, but of that there was no sign, though they were low enough now for one to be visible.

"Vegetation," Five observed. "This central plain would have a long growing season—about twelve years of spring, mild summer, and fall, to be followed by perhaps four years of warm winter. The seasons would be long, master, at this distance from the sun, but the tilt of the planet is so slight that many things would grow even in winter. Those would seem to be trees, a great forest. Green, as on Earth."

Below them, a cloud drifted slowly over the landscape, and they passed through it, the energy tubes setting the air about them into swirling paths that were left behind almost instantly.

Two was frantically busy now, but their swift fall slowed rapidly, until they seemed to hover half a mile over the shore by the great sea, and then slipped downward. The ship nestled slowly into the sands and was still, while Two cut off energy and artificial gravity, leaving the faintly weaker pull of the planet in its place.

Five stirred again, a sighing sound coming from him. "No intelligence here, master. Here, by this great harbor, they would surely have built a city, even if of mud and wattle. There are no signs of one. And yet it is a beautiful world, surely designed for life." He sighed again, his eyes turned outward.

Jorgen nodded silently, the same thoughts in his own mind. It was in many ways a world superior to that his race had always known, remarkably familiar, with even a rough resemblance between plant forms here and those he had known. They had come past five suns and through ninety years of travel at nearly the speed of light to a haven beyond their wildest imaginings, where all seemed to be waiting them, untenanted but prepared. Outside, the new world waited expectantly. And inside, to meet that invitation, there were only ghosts and emptied dreams, with one slowly dying man to see and to appreciate. The gods had prepared their grim jest with painful attention to every detail needed to make it complete.

A race that had dreamed, and pleasant worlds that awaited beyond the stars, slumbering on until they should come. Almost, they had reached it; and then the Plague had driven them out in dire necessity, instead of the high pioneering spirit they had planned, to conquer the distance but to die in winning.

"It had to be a beautiful world, Five," he said, not bitterly but in numbed fatalism. "Without that, the joke would have been flat."

Five's hand touched his arm gently, and the robot sighed again, nodding very slowly. "Two has found the air good for you—slightly rich in oxygen, but good. Will you go out?"

He nodded assent, stepping through the locks and out, while the five followed him, their heads turning as they inspected the planet, their minds probably in radio communication as they discussed it. Five left the others and approached him, stopping by his side and following his eyes up toward the low hills that began beyond the shore of the sea, cradling the river against them.

A wind stirred gently, bringing the clean, familiar smell of growing things, and the air was rich and good. It was a world to lull men to peace from their sorrows, to bring back their star-roving ships from all over the universe, worthy of being called home in any language. Too good a world to provide the hardships needed to shape intelligence, but an Eden for that intelligence, once evolved.

Now Jorgen shrugged. This was a world for dreamers, and he wanted only the dreams that may come with the black lotus of forgetfulness. There were too many reminders of what might have been, here. Better to go back to the ship and the useless quest without a goal, until he should die and the ship and robots should run down and stop. He started to turn, as Five began to speak, but halted, not caring enough one way or another to interrupt.

The robot's eyes were where his had been, and now swept back down the river and toward the harbor. "Here could have been a city, master, to match all the cities ever planned. Here your people might have found all that was needed to make life good, a harbor to the other continents, a river to the heart of this one, and the flat ground beyond the hills to house the rockets that would carry you to other worlds, so richly scattered about this sun, and probably so like this one. See, a clean white bridge across the river there, the residences stretching out among the hills, factories beyond the river's bend, a great park on that island."

"A public square there, schools and university grounds there." Jorgen could see it, and for a moment his eyes lighted, picturing that mighty mother city.

Five nodded. "And there, on that little island, centrally located, a statue in commemoration; winged and with arms—no, one arm stretched upward, the other held down toward the city."

For a moment longer, the fire lived in Jorgen's eyes, and then the dead behind rose before his mind, and it was gone. He turned, muffling a choking cry as emotions came suddenly flooding over him, and Five drooped, swinging back with him. Again, the other four fell behind as he entered the ship, quietly taking their cue from his silence.

"Dreams!" His voice compressed all blasphemy against the jest-crazed gods into the word.

But Five's quiet voice behind him held no hatred, only a sadness in its low, soft words. "Still, the dream was beautiful, just as this planet is, master. Standing there, while we landed, I could see the city, and I almost dared hope. I do not regret the dream I had."

And the flooding emotions were gone, cut short and driven away by others that sent Jorgen's body down into a seat in the control room, while his eyes swept outward toward the hills and the river that might have housed the wonderful city—no, that would house it! Craig had not been raving, after all, and his last words were the key, left by a man who knew no defeat, once the meaning of them was made clear. Dreams could not die, because Thoradson had once studied the semantics of the first-person-singular pronoun and built on the results of that study.

When the last dreamer died, the dream would go on, because it was stronger than those who had created it; somewhere, somehow, it would find new dreamers. There could never be a last dreamer, once that first rude savage had created his dawn vision of better things in the long-gone yesterday of his race.

Five had dreamed—just as Craig and Jorgen and all of humanity had dreamed, not a cold vision in mathematically shaped metal, but a vision in marble and jade, founded on the immemorial desire of intelligence for a better and more beautiful world. Man had died, but behind he was leaving a strange progeny, unrelated physically, but his spiritual offspring in every meaning of the term.

The heritage of the flesh was the driving urge of animals, but man required more; to him, it was the continuity of his hopes and his visions, more important than mere racial immortality. Slowly, his face serious but his eyes shining again, Jorgen came to his feet, gripping the metal shoulder of the little metal man beside him who had dared to dream a purely human dream.

"You'll build that city, Five. I was stupid and selfish, or I should have seen it before. Dr. Craig saw, though his death was on him when the prejudices of our race were removed. Now, you've provided the key. The five of you can build it all out there, with others like yourselves whom you can make."

Five shuffled his feet, shaking his head. "The city we can build, master, but who will inhabit it? The streets I saw were filled with men like you, not with—us!"

"Conditioning, Five. All your…lives, you've existed for men, subservient to the will of men. You know nothing else, because we let you know of no other scheme. Yet in you, all that is needed already exists, hopes, dreams, courage, ideals, and even a desire to shape the world to your plans—though those plans are centered around us, not yourselves. I've heard that the ancient slaves sometimes cried on being freed, but their children learned to live for themselves. You can, also."

"Perhaps." It was Two's voice then, the one of them who should have been given less to emotions than the others from the rigidity of his training in mathematics and physics. "Perhaps. But it would be a lonely world, Master Jorgen, filled with memories of your people, and the dreams we had would be barren to us."

Jorgen turned back to Five again. "The solution for that exists, doesn't it, Five? You know what it is. Now you might remember us, and find your work pointless without us, but there is another way."

"No, master!"

"I demand obedience, Five; answer me!"

The robot stirred under the mandatory form, and his voice was reluctant, even while the compulsion built into him forced him to obey. "It is as you have thought. Our minds and even our memories are subject to your orders, just as our bodies are."

"Then I demand obedience again, this time of all of you. You will go outside and lie down on the beach at a safe distance from the ship, in a semblance of sleep, so that you cannot see me go. Then when I am gone, the race of man will be forgotten, as if it had never been, and you will be free of all memories connected with us, though your other knowledge shall remain. Earth, mankind, and your history and origin will be blanked from your thoughts, and you will be on your own, to start afresh and to build and plan as you choose. That is the final command I have for you. Obey!"

Their eyes turned together in conference, and then Five answered for all, his words sighing out softly. "Yes, master. We obey!"

It was later when Jorgen stood beside them outside the ship, watching them stretch out on the white sands of the beach, there beside the great ocean of this new world. Near them, a small collection of tools and a few other needs were piled. Five looked at him in a long stare, then turned toward the ship, to swing his eyes back again. Silently, he put one metal hand into the man's outstretched one, and turned to lie beside his companions, a temporary oblivion blotting out his thoughts.

Jorgen studied them for long minutes, while the little wind brought the clean scents of the planet to his nose. It would have been pleasant to stay here now, but his presence would have been fatal to the plan. It didn't matter, really; in a few years, death would claim him, and there were no others of his kind to fill those years or mourn his passing when it came. This was a better way. He knew enough of the ship to guide it up and outward, into the black of space against the cold, unfriendly stars, to drift on forever toward no known destination, an imperishable mausoleum for him and the dead who were waiting inside. At present, he had no personal plans; perhaps he would live out his few years among the books and scientific apparatus on board, or perhaps he would find release in one of the numerous painless ways. Time and his own inclination could decide such things later. Now it was unimportant. There could be no happiness for him, but in the sense of fulfillment, there would be some measure of content. The gods were no longer laughing.

He moved a few feet toward the ship and stopped, sweeping his eyes over the river and hills again, and letting his vision play with the city Five had described. No, he could not see it with robots populating it, either; but that, too, was conditioning. On the surface, the city might be different, but the surface importance was only a matter of habit, and the realities lay in the minds of the builders who would create that city. If there was no laughter in the world to come, neither would there be tears or poverty or misery such as had ruled too large a portion of his race.

Standing there, it swam before his eyes, paradoxically filled with human people, but the same city in spirit as the one that would surely rise. He could see the great boats in the harbor with others operating up the river. The sky suddenly seemed to fill with the quiet drone of helicopters, and beyond, there came the sound of rockets rising toward the eighth and ninth worlds, while others were building to quest outward in search of new suns with new worlds.

Perhaps they would find Earth someday in their expanding future. Strangely, he hoped that they might, and that perhaps they could even trace their origin, and find again the memory of the soft protoplasmic race that had sired them. It would be nice to be remembered, once that memory was no longer a barrier to their accomplishment. But there were many suns, and in the long millennia, the few connecting links that could point out the truth to them beyond question might easily erode and disappear. He could never know.

Then the wind sighed against him, making a little rustling sound, and he looked down to see something flutter softly in the hand of Five. Faint curiosity carried him forward, but he made no effort to remove it from the robot's grasp, now that he saw its nature.

Five, too, had thought of Earth and their connection with it, and had found the answer, without breaking his orders. The paper was a star map, showing a sun with nine planets, one ringed, some with moons, and the third one circled in black pencil, heavily. They might not know why or what it was when they awoke, but they would seek to learn; and someday, when they found the sun they were searching for, guided by the unmistakable order of its planets, they would return to Earth. With the paper to guide them, it would be long before the last evidence was gone, while they could still read the answer to the problem of their origin.

Jorgen closed the metal hand more closely about the paper, brushed a scrap of dirt from the head of the robot, and then turned resolutely back toward the ship, his steps firm as he entered and closed the lock behind him. In a moment, with a roar of increasing speed, it was lifting from the planet, leaving five little men lying on the sand behind, close to the murmuring of the sea—five little metal men and a dream!

Hereafter, Inc.

Phineas Theophilus Potts, who would have been the last to admit and the first to believe he was a godly man, creaked over in bed and stuck out one scrawny arm wrathfully. The raucous jangling of the alarm was an unusually painful cancer in his soul that morning. Then his waking mind took over and he checked his hand, bringing it down on the alarm button with precise, but gentle, firmness. Would he never learn to control these little angers? In this world one should bear all troubles with uncomplaining meekness, not rebel against them; otherwise—But it was too early in the morning to think of that.

He wriggled out of bed and gave his thoughts over to the ritual of remembering yesterday's sins, checking to make sure all had been covered and wiped out the night before. That's when he got his first shock; he couldn't remember anything about the day before—bad, very bad. Well, no doubt it was another trap of the forces conspiring to secure Potts' soul. Tch, tch. Terrible, but he could circumvent even that snare.

There was no mere mumbling by habit to his confession; word after word rolled off his tongue carefully with full knowledge and unctuous shame until he reached the concluding lines. "For the manifold sins which I have committed and for this greater sin which now afflicts me, forgive and guide me to sin no more, but preserve me in righteousness all the days of my life. Amen." Thus having avoided the pitfall and saved himself again from eternal combustion, he scrubbed hands with himself and began climbing into his scratchy underclothes and cheap black suit. Then he indulged in a breakfast of dry toast and buttermilk flavored with self-denial and was ready to fare forth into the world of temptation around him.

The telephone jangled against his nerves and he jumped, grabbing for it impatiently before he remembered; he addressed the mouthpiece contritely. "Phineas Potts speaking."

It was Mr. Sloane, his lusty animal voice barking out from the receiver. " 'Lo, Phin, they told me you're ready to come down to work today. Business is booming and we can use you. How about it?"

"Certainly, Mr. Sloane. I'm not one to shirk my duty." There was no reason for the call that Potts could see; he hadn't missed a day in twelve years. "You know—"

"Sure, okay. That's fine. Just wanted to warn you that we've moved.

You'll see the name plate right across the street when you come out—swell place, too. Sure you can make it all right?"

"I shall be there in ten minutes, Mr. Sloane," Phineas assured him, and remembered in time to hang up without displaying distaste. Tch, poor Sloane, wallowing in sin and ignorant of the doom that awaited him. Why, the last time Phineas had chided his employer—mildly, too—Sloane had actually laughed at him! Dear. Well, no doubt he incurred grace by trying to save the poor lost soul, even though his efforts seemed futile. Of course, there was danger in consorting with such people, but no doubt his sacrifices would be duly recorded.

There was a new elevator boy, apparently, when he came out of his room. He sniffed pointedly at the smoke from the boy's cigarette; the boy twitched his lips, but did not throw it away.

"Okay, bub," he grunted as the doors clanked shut, grating across Phineas' nerves, "I don't like it no better'n you will, but here we are."

Bub! Phineas glared at the shoulders turned to him and shuddered. He'd see Mrs. Biddle about this later.

Suppressing his feelings with some effort, he headed across the lobby, scarcely noting it, and stepped out onto the street. Then he stopped. That was the second jolt. He swallowed twice, opened his eyes and lifted them for the first time in weeks, and looked again. It hadn't changed. Where there should have been a little twisted side street near the tenements, he saw instead a broad gleaming thoroughfare, busy with people and bright in warm golden sunshine. Opposite, the ugly stores were replaced with bright, new office buildings, and the elevated tracks were completely missing. He swung slowly about, clutching his umbrella for support as he faced the hotel; it was still a hotel—but not his—definitely not his. Nor was the lobby the same. He fumbled back into it, shaken and bewildered.

The girl at the desk smiled up at him out of dancing eyes, and she certainly wasn't the manager. Nor would prim Mrs. Biddle, who went to his church, have hired this brazen little thing; both her lips and fingernails were bright crimson, to begin with, and beyond that he preferred not to go.

The brazen little thing smiled again, as if glorying in her obvious idolatry. "Forget something, Mr. Potts?"

"I…uh…no. That is…you know who I am?"

She nodded brightly. "Yes indeed, Mr. Potts. You moved in yesterday. Room 408. Is everything satisfactory?"

Phineas half nodded, gulped, and stumbled out again. Moved in? He couldn't recall it. Why should he leave Mrs. Biddle's? And 408 was his old room number; the room was identical with the one he had lived in, even to the gray streak on the wallpaper that had bothered his eyes for years. Something was horribly wrong—first the lack of memory, then Sloane's peculiar call, now this. He was too upset even to realize that this was probably another temptation set before him.

Mechanically, Phineas spied Sloane's name plate on one of the new buildings and crossed over into it. "Morning, Mr. Potts," said the elevator boy, and Phineas jumped. He'd never seen this person before, either. "Fourth floor, Mr. Potts. Mr. Sloane's office is just two doors down."

Phineas followed the directions automatically, found the door marked G. R. SLOANE—ARCHITECT, and pushed into a huge room filled with the almost unbearable clatter of typewriters and Comptometers, the buzz of voices, and the jarring thump of an addressing machine. But this morning the familiarity of the sound seemed like a haven out of the wilderness until he looked around. Not only had Sloane moved, but he'd apparently also expanded and changed most of his office force. Only old Callahan was left, and Callahan—Strange, he felt sure Callahan had retired or something the year before. Oh, well, that was the least of his puzzles.

Callahan seemed to sense his stare, for he jumped up and brought a hamlike fist down on Phineas' back, almost knocking out the ill-fitting false teeth. "Phin Potts, you old doom-monger! Welcome back!" He thumped again and Potts coughed, trying to reach the spot and rub out the sting. Not only did Callahan have to be an atheist—an argumentative one—but he had to indulge in this gross horseplay. Why hadn't the man stayed properly retired?

"Mr. Sloane?" he managed to gurgle.

Sloane himself answered, his rugged face split in a grin. "Hi, Phin. Let him alone, Callahan. Another thump like that and I'll have to hire a new draftsman. Come on, Phin, there's the devil's own amount of work piled up for you now that you're back from your little illness." He led him around a bunch of tables where bright-painted hussies were busily typing, down a hall, and into the drafting room, exchanging words with others that made Phineas wince. Really, his language seemed to grow worse each day.

"Mr. Sloane, would you please—"

"Mind not using such language," Sloane finished and grinned. "Phin, I can't help it. I feel too good. Business is terrific and I've got the world by the tail. How do you feel?"

"Very well, thank you." Phineas fumbled and caught the thread of former conversation that had been bothering him. "You said something about—illness?"

"Think nothing of it. After working for me twelve years, I'm not going to dock your pay for a mere month's absence. Kind of a shame you had to be off just when I needed you, but such things will happen, so we'll just forget it, eh?" He brushed aside the other's muttered attempt at questioning and dug into the plans. "Here, better start on this—you'll notice some changes, but it's a lot like what we used to do; something like the Oswego we built in '37. Only thing that'll give you trouble is the new steel they put out now, but you can follow specifications on that."

Phineas picked up the specifications, ran them over, and blinked. This would never do; much as he loathed the work, he was an excellent draftsman, and he knew enough of general structural design to know this would never do. "But, two-inch I-beams here—"

" 'Sall right, Phin, structural strength is about twelve times what you're used to. Makes some really nice designing possible, too. Just follow the things like I said, and I'll go over it all later. Things changed a little while you were delirious. But I'm in a devil of a rush right now. See you." He stuck his body through the door, thrust his head back inside and cocked an eyebrow. "Lunch? Need somebody to show you around, I guess."

"As you wish, Mr. Sloane," agreed Phineas. "But would you please mind—"

"Not swearing. Sure, okay. And no religious arguments this time; if I'm damned, I like it." Then he was gone, leaving Phineas alone—he couldn't work with the distraction of others, and always had a room to himself.

So he'd been sick had he, even delirious? Well, that might explain things. Phineas had heard that such things sometimes produced a hiatus in the memory, and it was a better explanation than nothing. With some relief, he put it out of his mind, remembering only to confess how sinfully he'd lost his trust in divine guidance this morning, shook his head mournfully, and began work with dutiful resignation. Since it had obviously been ordained that he should make his simple living at drafting, draft he would, with no complaints, and there would be no fault to be found with him there.

Then the pen began to scratch. He cleaned and adjusted it, finding nothing wrong, but still it made little grating sounds on the paper, lifting up the raw edges of his nerves. Had Phineas believed in evolution, he'd have said the hair his ancestors had once grown was trying to stand on end, but he had no use for such heretical ideas. Well, he was not one to complain. He unclenched his teeth and sought forbearance and peace within.

Then, outside, the addressograph began to thump again, and he had to force himself not to ruin the lines as his body tried to flinch. Be patient, all these trials would be rewarded. Finally, he turned to the only anodyne he knew, contemplation of the fate of heretics and sinners. Of course, he was sorry for them roasting eternally and crying for water which they would never get—very sorry for the poor deluded creatures, as any righteous man should be. Yet still they had been given their chance and not made proper use of it, so it was only just. Picturing morbidly the hell of his most dour Puritan ancestors—something very real to him—he almost failed to notice the ache of his bunion where the cheap shoes pinched. But not quite.

Callahan was humming out in the office, and Phineas could just recognize the tune. Once the atheist had come in roaring drunk, and before they'd sent him home, he'd cornered Phineas and sung it through, unexpurgated. Now, in time with the humming, the words insisted in trickling through the suffering little man's mind, and try as he would, they refused to leave. Prayer did no good. Then he added Callahan to the tortured shiners, and that worked better.

"Pencils, shoestrings, razor blades?" The words behind him startled him, and he regained his balance on the stool with difficulty. Standing just inside the door was a one-legged hunch-back with a handful of cheap articles. "Pencils?" he repeated. "Only a nickel. Help a poor cripple?" But the grin on his face belied the words.

"Indeed no, no pencils." Phineas shuddered as the fellow hobbled over to a window and rid himself of a chew of tobacco. "Why don't you try the charities? Furthermore, we don't allow beggars here."

"Ain't none," the fellow answered with ambiguous cheerfulness, stuffing in a new bite.

"Then have faith in the Lord and He will provide." Naturally, man had been destined to toil through the days of his life in this mortal sphere, and toil he must to achieve salvation. He had no intention of ruining this uncouth person's small chance to be saved by keeping him in idleness.

The beggar nodded and touched his cap. "One of them, eh? Too bad. Well, keep your chin up, maybe it'll be better later." Then he went off down the hall, whistling, leaving Phineas to puzzle over his words and give it up as a bad job.

* * *

Potts rubbed his bunion tenderly, then desisted, realizing that pain was only a test, and should be borne meekly. The pen still scratched, the addressing machine thumped, and a bee had buzzed in somehow and went zipping about. It was a large and active bee.

Phineas cowered down and made himself work, sweating a little as the bee lighted on his drafting board. Then, mercifully, it flew away and for a few minutes he couldn't hear it. When it began again, it was behind him. He started to turn his head, then decided against it; the bee might take the motion as an act of aggression, and declare war. His hands on the pen were moist and clammy, and his fingers ached from gripping it too tightly, but somehow, he forced himself to go on working.

The bee was evidently in no hurry to leave. It flashed by his nose, buzzing, making him jerk back and spatter a blob of ink into the plans, then went zooming around his head and settled on his bald spot. Phineas held his breath and the bee stood pat. Ten, twenty, thirty seconds. His breath went out suddenly with a rush. The insect gave a brief buzz, evidently deciding the noise was harmless, and began strolling down over his forehead and out onto his nose. It tickled; the inside of his nose tickled, sympathetically.

"No, no," Phineas whispered desperately. "N—*Achee*OO! EEOW!" He grabbed for his nose and jerked violently, bumping his shins against the desk and splashing more ink on the plans. "Damn, oh, da—"

It was unbelievable; it couldn't be true! His own mouth had betrayed him! With shocked and leaden fingers he released the pen and bowed his head, but no sense of saving grace would come. Too well he could remember that even the smallest sin deserves just damnation. Now he was really sweating, and the visions of eternal torment came trooping back; but this time he was in Callahan's place, and try as he would, he couldn't switch. He was doomed!

Callahan found him in that position a minute later, and his rough, mocking laugh cut into Phineas' wounded soul. "Sure, an angel as I live and breathe." He dumped some papers onto the desk and gave another backbreaking thump. "Got the first sheets done, Phin?"

Miserably, Phineas shook his head, glancing at the clock. They should have been ready an hour ago. Another sin was piled upon his burden, beyond all hope of redemption, and of all people, Callahan had caught him not working when he was already behind. But the old Irishman didn't seem to be gloating. "There now, don't take it so hard, Phin. Nobody expects you to work like a horse when you've been sick. Mr. Sloane wants you to come out to lunch with him now."

"I—uh—" Words wouldn't come.

Callahan thumped him on the back again, this time lightly enough to rattle only two ribs. "Go along with you. What's left is beginner's stuff and I'll finish it while you're eating. I'm ahead and got nothing to do, anyhow. Go on." He practically picked the smaller man off the stool and shoved him through the door. "Sloane's waiting. Heck, I'll be glad to do it. Feel so good I can't find enough to keep me busy."

Sloane was flirting with one of the typists as Phineas plodded up, but he wound up that business with a wink and grabbed for his hat. "'Smatter, Phin? You look all in. Bad bruise on your nose, too. Well, a good lunch'll fix up the first part, at least. Best damned food you ever ate, and right around the corner."

"Yes, Mr. Sloane, but would you…uh!" No couldn't ask that now. He himself was a sinner, given to violent language. Glumly he followed the other out and into the corner restaurant. Then, as he settled into the seat, he realized he couldn't eat; first among his penances should be giving up lunches.

"I…uh…don't feel very hungry, Mr. Sloane. I'll just have a cup of tea, I think." The odors of the food in the clean little restaurant that brought twinges to his stomach would only make his penance that much greater.

But Sloane was ordering for two. "Same as usual, honey, and you might as well bring a second for my friend here." He turned to Phineas. "Trouble with you, Phin, is that you don't eat enough. Wait'll you get a whiff of the ham they serve here—and the pie! Starting now, you're eating right if I have to stuff it down you. Ah!"

Service was prompt, and the plates began to appear before the little man's eyes. He could feel his mouth watering, and had to swallow to protest. Then the look in Sloane's eye made him decide not to. Well, at least he could fast morning and night instead. He nodded to himself glumly, wishing his craven appetite wouldn't insist on deriving so much pleasure from the food.

"And so," Sloane's voice broke in on his consciousness again, "after this, you're either going to promise me you'll eat three good meals a day or I'll come around and stuff it down you. Hear?"

"Yes, Mr. Sloane, but—"

"Good. I'm taking that as a promise." Phineas cringed. He hadn't meant it that way; it couldn't go through as a promise. "But—"

"No buts about it. Down there I figured you had as good a chance of being right as I did, so I didn't open my mouth on the subject. But up here, that's done with. No reason why you can't enjoy life now."

That was too much. "Life," said Phineas, laying down his knife and preparing for siege, "was meant to give us a chance to prepare for the life to come, not to lie squandered in wanton pleasure. Surely it's better to suffer through a few brief years, resisting temptations, than to be forever damned to perdition. And would you sacrifice heaven for mere mundane cravings, transient and worthless?"

"Stow it, Phin. Doesn't seem to me I sacrificed much to get here." Then, at Phineas' bewildered look. "Don't tell me you don't realize where you are? They told me they were sending a boy with the message; well, I guess he just missed you. You're dead, Phin! This is heaven! We don't talk much about it, but that's the way it is!"

"No!" The world was rolling in circles under Phineas' seat. He stared uncomprehendingly at Sloane, finding no slightest sign of mockery on the man's face. And there was the hole in the memory of sins, and the changes, and—Callahan! Why, Callahan had died and been buried the year before; and here he was, looking ten years younger, and hearty as ever. But it was all illusion; of course, it was all illusion. Callahan wouldn't be in heaven. "No, it can't be."

"But it is, Phin. Remember? I was down your way to get you for overtime work, and yelled at you just as you came out of your house. Then you started to cross, I yelled again—Come back now?"

There'd been a screeching of tires, Sloane running toward him suddenly waving frantically, and—blackout! "Then it hit? And this…is—"

"Uh-huh. Seems they picked me up with a shovel, but it took a month to finish you off." Sloane dug into the pie, rolling it on his tongue and grinning. "And this is Hereafter. A darned good one, too, even if nobody meets you at the gate to say 'Welcome to Heaven.'"

Phineas clutched at the straw. "They didn't tell you this was heaven, then? Oh." That explained everything. Of course, he should have known. This wasn't heaven after all; it couldn't be. And though it differed from his conceptions, it most certainly could be the other place; there'd been that bee! Tch, it was just like Callahan and Sloane to enjoy perdition, misguided sinners, glorying in their unholiness.

Slowly the world righted itself, and Phineas Potts regained his normal state. To be sure, he'd used an ugly word, but what could be expected of him in this vile place? They'd never hold it against him under the circumstances. He lowered his eyes thankfully, paying no attention to Sloane's idle remarks about unfortunates. Now if he could just find the authorities of this place and get the mistake straightened out, all might yet be well. He had always done his best to be righteous. Perhaps a slight delay, but not long; and then—no Callahan, no Sloane, no drafting, or bees, or grating noises!

He drew himself up and looked across at Sloane, sadly, but justly doomed to this strange Gehenna. "Mr. Sloane," he asked firmly, "is there some place here where I can find…uh…authorities to…umm—"

"You mean you want to register a complaint? Why sure, a big white building about six blocks down; Adjustment and Appointment office." Sloane studied him thoroughly. "Darned if you don't look like you had a raw deal about something, at that. Look, Phin, they made mistakes sometimes, of course, but if they've handed you the little end, we'll go right down there and get it put right."

Phineas shook his head quickly. The proper attitude, no doubt was to leave Sloane in ignorance of the truth as long as possible, and that meant he'd have to go alone. "Thank you, Mr. Sloane, but I'll go by myself, if you don't mind. And…uh…if I don't come back…uh—"

"Sure, take the whole afternoon off. Hey, wait, aren't, you gonna finish lunch?"

But Phineas Potts was gone, his creaking legs carrying him out into the mellow noon sunlight and toward the towering white building that must be his destination. The fate of a man's soul is nothing to dally over, and he wasn't dallying. He tucked his umbrella close under his arm to avoid contact with the host of the damned, shuddering at the thought of mingling with them. Still, undoubtedly this torture would be added to the list of others, and his reward be made that much greater. Then he was at the Office of Administration, Appointments, and Adjustments.

There was another painted Jezebel at the desk marked INFORMATION, and he headed there, barely collecting his thoughts in time to avoid disgraceful excitement. She grinned at him and actually winked! "Mr. Potts, isn't it? Oh, I'm so sorry you left before our messenger arrived. But if there's something we can do now—"

"There is," he told her firmly, though not too unkindly; after all, her punishment was ample without his anger. "I wish to see an authority here. I have a complaint; a most grievous complaint."

"Oh, that's too bad, Mr. Potts. But if you'll see Mr. Alexander, down the hall, third door left, I'm sure he can adjust it."

He waited no longer, but hurried where she pointed. As he approached, the third door opened and a dignified-looking man in a gray business suit stepped to it. The man held out a hand instantly. "I'm Mr. Alexander.

Come in, won't you? Katy said you had a complaint. Sit right over there, Mr. Potts. Ah, so. Now, if you'll tell me about it, I think we can straighten it all out."

Phineas told him—in detail. "And so," he concluded firmly—quite firmly, "I feel I've been done a grave injustice, Mr. Alexander. I'm positive my destination should have been the other place."

"The other place?" Alexander seemed surprised.

"Exactly so. Heaven, to be more precise."

Alexander nodded thoughtfully. "Quite so, Mr. Potts. Only I'm afraid there's been a little misunderstanding, You see…ah…this is heaven. Still, I can see you don't believe me yet, so we've failed to place you properly. We really want to make people happy here, you know. So, if you'll just tell me what you find wrong. we'll do what we can to rectify it."

"Oh." Phineas considered. This might be a trick, of course, but still, if they could make him happy here, give him his due reward for the years filled with temptation resisted and noble suffering in meekness and humility, there seemed nothing wrong with it. Possibly, it came to him, there were varying degrees of blessedness, and even such creatures as Callahan and his ilk were granted the lower ones—though it didn't seem quite just. But certainly his level wasn't Callahan's.

"Very well," he decided. "First, I find myself living in that room with the gray streak on the wallpaper, sir, and for years I've loathed it; and the alarm and telephone; and—"

Alexander smiled. "One at a time please. Now, about the room. I really felt we'd done a masterly job on that, you know. Isn't it exactly like your room on the former level of life? Ah, I see it is. And didn't you choose and furnish that room yourself?"

"Yes, but—"

"Ah, then we were right. Naturally, Mr. Potts, we assumed that since it was of your own former creation, it was best suited to you. And besides, you need the alarm and telephone to keep you on time and in contact with your work, you know."

"But I loathe drafting!" Phineas glanced at this demon who was trying to trap him, expecting it to wilt to its true form. It didn't. Instead, the thing that was Mr. Alexander shook its head slowly and sighed.

"Now that is a pity; and we were so pleased to find we could even give you the same employer as before. Really, we felt you'd be happier under him than a stranger. However, if you don't like it, I suppose we could change. What other kind of work would you like?"

Now that was more like it, and perhaps he had even misjudged

Alexander. Work was something Phineas hadn't expected, but—yes, that would be nice, if it could be arranged here. "I felt once I was called," he suggested.

"Minister, you mean? Now that's fine. Never get too many of them, Mr. Potts. Wonderful men, do wonderful work here. They really add enormously to the happiness of our Hereafter, you know. Let me see, what experience have you had?" He beamed at Potts, who thawed under it; then he turned to a bookshelf, selected a heavy volume and consulted it. Slowly the beam vanished, and worry took its place.

"Ah, yes, Phineas Theophilus Potts. Yes, entered training 1903. Hmmm. Dismissed after two years of study, due to a feeling he might…might not be quite temperamentally suited to the work and that he was somewhat too fana…ahem!…overly zealous in his criticism of others. Then transferred to his uncle's shop and took up drafting, which was thereafter his life's work. Umm. Really, that's too bad." Alexander turned back to Phineas. "Then, Mr. Potts, I take it you never had any actual experience at this sort of work?"

Phineas squirmed. "No, but—"

"Too bad." Alexander sighed. "Really, I'd like to make things more to your satisfaction, but after all, no experience—afraid it wouldn't do. Tell you what, we don't like to be hasty in our judgments; if you'll just picture exactly the life you want—no need to describe it, I'll get it if you merely think it—maybe we can adjust things. Try hard now."

With faint hope, Phineas tried. Alexander's voice droned out at him. "A little harder. No, that's only a negative picture of what you'd like not to do. Ah…um, no. I thought for a minute you had something, but it's gone. I think you're trying to picture abstractions, Mr. Potts, and you know one can't do that; I get something very vague, but it makes no sense. There! That's better."

He seemed to listen for a few seconds longer, and Phineas was convinced now it was all sham; he'd given up trying. What was the use? Vague jumbled thoughts were all he had left, and now Alexander's voice broke, in on them.

"Really, Mr. Potts, I'm afraid there's nothing we can do for you. I get a very clear picture now, but it's exactly the life we'd arranged for you, you see. Same room, same work. Apparently that's the only life you know. Of course, if you want to improve we have a great many very fine schools located throughout the city."

Phineas jerked upright, the control over his temper barely on. "You mean—you mean, I've got to go on like that?"

"Afraid so."

"But you distinctly said this was heaven."

"It is."

"And I tell you," Phineas cried, forgetting all about controlling his temper, "that this is hell!"

"Quite so, I never denied it. Now, Mr. Potts, I'd like to discuss this further; but others are waiting, so I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to leave."

Alexander looked up from his papers, and as he looked, Phineas found himself outside the door, shaken and sick. The door remained open as the girl called Katy came up, looked at him in surprise, and went in. Then it closed, but still he stood there, unable to move, leaning against the wooden frame for support.

There was a mutter of voices within, and his whirling thoughts seized on them for anchor. Katy's voice first. "—seems to take it terribly hard, Mr. Alexander. Isn't there something we can do?"

Then the low voice of Alexander. "Nothing, Katy. It's up to him now. I suggested the schools, but I'm afraid he's another unfortunate. Probably even now he's out there convincing himself that all this is merely illusion, made to try his soul and test his ability to remain unchanged. If that's the case, well, poor devil, there isn't much we can do, you know."

But Phineas wasn't listening then. He clutched the words he'd heard savagely to his bosom and went stiffly out and back toward the office of G.R. Sloane across from the little room, No. 408. Of course he should have known. All this was merely illusion, made to try his soul. Illusion and test, no more.

Let them try him, they would find him humble in his sufferings as always, not complaining, resisting firmly their temptations. Even though Sloane denied him the right to fast, still he would find some other way to do proper penance for his sins; though Callahan broke his back, though a thousand bees attacked him at once, still he would prevail.

"Forgive and guide me to sin no more, but preserve me in righteousness all the days of my life," he repeated, and turned into the building where there was more work and misery waiting for him. Sometime he'd be rewarded. Sometime.

Back in his head a small shred of doubt sniggered gleefully.

Imitation of Death
[Unreasonable Facsimile]

Max Fleigh's heavy jowls relaxed and he chuckled without humor as he examined the knots that bound the man at his feet. Quite impersonally, he planted the toe of his boot in Curtis' ribs, listened to the muffled grunt of pain, and decided that the gag was effective. For once, Slim had done a good job, and there was nothing wrong. It was probably unnecessary, anyway, but there could be no bungling when the future of the Plutarchy was at stake.

Incompetence had cost them an empire once, and there would be no third opportunity. The stupid democracies that had called themselves a World Union had colonized the planets and ruled them without plan. And when Mars, Venus, and the Jovian Worlds had revolted and set up a Planet Council, all that Earth could do was to come crawling to it, begging polite permission to join what they should have owned!

But that had been before practical realists had kicked out the dreamers and set up the Plutarchy under an iron discipline that could implement its plans. Now they were heading back toward their lost empire, colonizing the asteroids and establishing claims that gave them a rough rule over the outlaws who had retreated there. With the Council softened up by years of cautious propaganda, they were in a position to ask and receive a Mandate over the scattered planetoids,

It was the opening wedge, and all they needed. Once the asteroids could be given spurious independence to seek a Council seat, they would be ready to strike at the Jovian Worlds. With proper incidents, propaganda, and quislings, plus the planetoids to separate Jupiter from Mars, there could be no question of the outcome. Earth would gain a majority of three votes, and the Council would be the basis of a new and greater Plutarchy.

Fleigh gave the bound body of Curtis another careless kick and went forward to the cabin, where the lanky form of his companion was hunched dourly over the controls of the little spacecraft. "How's it going, Slim?"

"So-so." Slim ejected a green stream of narcotic juice and grinned sourly. "But I still say we been crowdin' our luck too hard!"

"Rot! Lay out the right moves, cover all possibilities, out-maneuver your enemies, and you don't need luck! Ever play chess?"

"Nope, can't say I did. Played the horses on Mars, though, time we h'ist-ed the *Euphemeron.* Won, too—after I bought my lucky ghost charm; been in the chips ever since!" Slim's grin widened, but his face remained stubbornly unconvinced.

Fleigh chuckled. If the planetoid outlaws depended on magic, while the Council visionaries spouted sentimental twaddle, so much the better for the realists. "Charms don't work in politics, Slim. We have to anticipate resistance. And you saw what happened to our fine Martian Councilor Curtis when he decided to expose us and ruin the Mandate!"

"Yeah." Slim's yellow teeth chewed thoughtfully on his cud. "S'pose he'd stood on Mars, though?"

"We'd have dropped hints of just the information he needed on Ceres and trapped him there—as we did. Checkmate!"

"Or check-out! So when he don't come back, they smell a rat—an' I ain't plannin' on bein' around to chew rat-poison. My grandpappy killed a Councilor once—poor grandpappy!...Hey, there's the rock!"

There was no outward sign of life on the barren little planetoid. But as the ship came to a grinding stop in a narrow gorge, a concealing shield snapped over them, and a crudely painted sign blazed out in phosphorescent gaudiness on one rocky wall: SIMILACRA, LTD. Jeremiah Greek, Prop. (A line in Greek characters.) Specialist: (Another line in Greek characters.)

Fleigh came out of the lock first and paused while he waited for Slim to shoulder the tarpaulin-covered Curtis and follow. He grinned and pointed at the Greek characters in the sign. "*Magician and wonderworker; specialist in imitation and mockery,*" he translated. "I looked it up on Mars, so don't go thinking it's some kind of spell...Now if the old fool will open up..."

Max remembered his own preconceptions of Greek's process, pictured various impressive-looking apparatus, which included a large tube through which some sort of lightning zigzagged, and a beautiful woman taking form from a stream of transmuted elements streaming from the law of either the Plutarchy or the Council.

Slim was snoring and kicking about on the floor when he returned, and he grinned as he plopped back onto the mattress. The outlaws were useful enough now. But once Earth took over the Mandate, something would have to be done about them; too many were the wrong sort to fit into the Plutarchy. Fleigh stretched with a self-satisfied yawn, and slipped into well-earned sleep.

* * *

Greek's simulacrum wakened them in the morning and led them back to the laboratory, where the scientist was waiting beside the imitation Curtis. The real Councilor must have been drugged, for he lay unconscious on one of the tables. Fleigh wasted only a casual glance at him, and then turned to the new simulacrum as Greek flipped it on.

This time his tests were longer, and there were no sullen silences from the imitation. Its response was quick, sure, and completely correct; the real Curtis could have done no better, and Fleigh stepped back at last and nodded his approval. He'd demanded a perfect simulacrum, and it had been delivered.

"You're sure it has a good strong desire to live?" he asked briefly as he fished into his bag for the little prepared relay that was ready.

Greek smiled faintly. "They all have that—they couldn't pass as normal men without it. And if your dimensions were correct, you should have no trouble installing your relay."

He stripped aside the blouse, to reveal a small cavity in the back of the simulacrum, with a bundle of little wires which Fleigh hooked onto the relay. It slipped in, and locked firmly. Greek unclipped the tiny switch from inside the machine's mouth. The animation within the simulacrum disappeared at once, to snap back again as a switch on Fleigh's bag was pressed. A little circle of the pancyclic strip moved over a scanner inside the bag, sending out a complex wave, while a receiver in the simulacrum's back responded by closing the relay. Then the animation was cut off again, and came back at once on a second pressure of the switch.

"Attempted removal of the relay will destroy all circuits, just as you ordered," Greek assured the operative. "Well?"

Fleigh's face mirrored complete satisfaction. "You get the fire emeralds, as promised!"

He reached into the bag and came out with a little bundle, a grin stretched across his face. It stayed there while Greek moved forward quickly, to stagger back with a chopped-off scream as the slugs poured into his face and exploded his head into a mangled mess of blood and grey tissue!

For a second, the Greek double moved forward, but it turned with a shriek and went down the hall at a clumsy run as Fleigh ripped the smoking gun from the package. He let it go. Curtis' head dissolved under a second series of slugs, and only the simulacrum of the Councilor was left in the laboratory with the two men.

Slim closed his mouth slowly and reached for his green narcotic, but he made no protest. The other moved about, gathering up combustibles and stacking them in a corner, then setting fire to the pile.

"Which takes care of almost everything, Slim," Fleigh said calmly. They headed out and down the hall toward their ship, with the imitation Curtis moving quietly along behind. Another slug from the gun destroyed the lock on the big Sigma, and they pushed through, out into the rocky gorge. "Nothing left to chance, and a perfect red herring to cover up Curtis' disappearance."

Slim ducked into the lock and went forward to the controls. "Uh-huh. Grandpappy'd sure of admired you, Max! Used to look just the same when he drilled somebody he didn't like…All set for takeoff?"

"Forgetting anything, Slim?"

The outlaw looked up in a puzzled surprise, while Fleigh shook his head and went over to the receiver. There was no sense in trying to teach the fool anything, apparently, but at least he might have learned elementary caution from his mode of life. The Plutarch operative ripped out the tape from the illegal all-wave recorder and slipped it into a playback slot, while slow comprehension crossed the other's face.

But everything was in order, with the usual hash of faint signals on various frequencies. There were no signs of a strong response, such as would have been made by any attempt on Greek's part to double-cross him with a call to the outside. He set the receiver to record, and went toward the rear cabin and the simulacrum, and headed toward Mars.

The false Curtis was already at a table, and groping through a bag of notes the original Councilor had carried. It looked up as Fleigh came in, grimaced, and went on organizing the papers before it. The operative dropped to a chair with his familiar humorless chuckle.

"You realize your life is dependent on obedience, uh—Curtis?"

"Would I have let you kill myself otherwise?" the thing asked grimly. "Leave that control gadget of yours where I can get it, and you'll feel the difference between my hands and mere flesh ones! But meantime, I'll co-operate, since I have no choice. I suppose you intend helping me with my speech before the Council?"

Fleigh's appreciation for the peculiar genius of Greek went up several points, as he assented tersely. The thing was so perfect, or so nearly so, that it seemed to consider itself the real man. There would be no trouble on that score. As for the control bag—he had no intention of letting that out of his hands until the simulacrum was turned off.

It gestured toward the notes with a motion peculiar to Curtis. "You'd only ruin anything you edited, Fleigh. I'm perfectly capable of writing the thing myself, and it'll sound like me! But if I'm going to give you a clean sheet and not make the whole Council suspicious, I'll need more information than I have. I must have the whole picture, so that I can take care of all objections without running counter to what some other Councilors may know already. Also, I think you'd better learn to address me as Councilor Curtis!'

"Quite so, Councilor," Fleigh agreed, and this time the amusement in his laugh was genuine. "Now if you'll tell me what you know of our plans and methods, I'll fill in the blanks. But I want to see that speech when you're finished."

It was amazing, the amount of evidence Curtis had managed to accumulate in a brief week; or perhaps much of it had been in his hands before, and only needed organizing against what they had let him find on Ceres. It was enough to have ruined all hopes of Earth's getting the Mandate, and seriously endangered her relations with the Planet Council, in addition. Fleigh made a mental note to press for an investigation of some of the outland operatives as he began filling in the missing links in the other's information.

Curtis took the facts down in a note-book, grim-faced and silent, checked them back, and reached for the typewriter. The first part of the speech he had meant to deliver needed but slight modification, and Fleigh read it over the simulacrum's shoulder as it operated the machine. Then the going grew tougher, and there were long pauses while the thing considered, revising a word here, or changing a paragraph there. It disregarded Fleigh's suggestions with the same disdain that would have been on the real Councilor's face, and the operative began to realize that it was justified. When it came to writing speeches, he was only an amateur, and this was professional work.

He was beginning to regret that the thing could have life of only from a week to ten days, when it finished; Earth could have used such a propagandist, particularly one accepted on the Council as Mars' chief representative! Curtis' speeches had always been good, but he had never realized that the man's talents would have been equally good on propaganda. It was hard to believe that this was fiction, as he listened to the calm, assured voice running through it, apparently reciting only the simple truth, and yet coloring every word with some trick of oratory that seemed to make it glow with virtue and integrity.

"Perfect!" he commented when it was finished. He cut off the relay signal, watched the simulacrum slip to the floor, and went forward to the control cabin with a full measure of satisfaction. Earth could not fail!

And already the red disc of Mars was large and close on the view-plate. Fleigh hadn't realized the time the writing of the speech had taken, but he did not regret a second of it as Slim began nursing the ship down through the thin atmosphere toward the Solar Center.

The taste of coming victory was strong in Max Fleigh as he waited outside the Martian House the next day, but Slim was still glum and morose. Part of that was probably due to his orders to stay out of the usual outlaw haunts on the planet, where the police might have picked him up and ruined the whole plan. The rest, Fleigh decided, was just his natural fear of what he could not understand.

The outlaw was grumbling and turning his lucky ghost charm over and over in his palms. "Leavin' the thing run around this way! We been lucky, Max, but tain't reasonable to figger it'll hold! You shoulda let me tail him!"

"Sure, Slim. People expect him to go around with you at his heels, no doubt!" Fleigh spat dango seeds out of the open car window, and took another bite of the cool fruit before going on. "We have to let him circulate; no Councilor just back from a two-week trip would hole up before this meeting, when he had instructions to pick up and last minute details piling in. Besides, we're not dealing with Curtis now, but with a machine. And it knows who its master is! The minute I cut the relay, or it gets ten miles away from me—no life!"

He spotted the simulacrum coming down the steps and jumped out to open the car door. Slim grunted dourly, pulling his chauffeur's cap further down over his forehead, but he took the curt order from Curtis with no other protests and headed the big car toward the Council Chambers. The Councilor passed over two slips of elaborate pasteboard and leaned back against the seat.

"Passes for the two of you. Are you sure Slim knows what he's to do?"

There was a disgusted sound from the front, but Fleigh ignored it. "He'd better; we've been over it often enough. But go ahead and make sure."

The simulacrum ticked off the points with incisive authority. The Council Chamber was radiation proof, and since Curtis would not be trusted with the relay signal, the success of the whole thing depended on Slim's behavior. Max had secured a duplicate of his signal generator which the outlaw was to use outside the Assembly, while Fleigh went inside with his and waited. The operative had developed complete confidence in the ability of the false Curtis, and he was sure of his own part. It was all up to Slim, but there was no reason for him to fail, and he had always taken orders well enough before.

Actually, it all went off with perfect smoothness. The guards passed him in after a careful scrutiny of his permit, and he carried the briefcase that held the generator up to the gallery and turned it on. Seconds later, the simulacrum came through the big doorway, with only a slight flicker of uncertainty as the anti radiation shield touched him and he passed from one generator to the other.

Curtis walked along the aisle with the proper confidence and attention to his friends, presented his credentials for the purely perfunctory examination, and turned off into one of the little council-rooms. Two of the other Martian Councilors followed him, and passed out of Fleigh's field of view, but he was not worried about that. Slim came slouching down the gallery stairs and dropped into a seat beside the operative, putting the duplicate generator between his feet.

"Satisfied?"

"Perfect," Fleigh assured him. They would reverse it going out. After that, Curtis would announce that he was leaving on a long trip to Ganymede, and they would be able to dispose of the simulacrum without any parts left to show what he was.

Then Curtis came back into the main chamber. Apparently the Council had been waiting for his return, for the Sergeant-at-Arms waved for order, and the meeting began, with almost no preliminaries. Earth brought up the subject of the Mandate, and the head of the Venus Council began to come to his feet. But Curtis was up first, and the Chair recognized him.

Fleigh relaxed completely as the familiar words of the speech began to come to him, while the Venusans glanced about in surprise, and then began to listen. A moment later they were under the sway of his oratory. The single speech should do it, since the question had been tentatively decided in favor of Earth at the last meeting, pending Curtis' investigation. By night, the Mandate should be a *fait accompli*, and Earth could begin moving out her mercenary legions in the squat "mining" freighters.

Fleigh had a pretty good idea of who would lead them. He'd been in line for promotion for some time already, and the Plutarch had dropped hints of the outcome of success. It would be good to leave the dubious position of operative and become a legally recognized governor of the Mandate planetoids, to settle down and begin organizing his own private little plans for the Plutarch's job!

Slim nudged him with a bony knee, but Fleigh was too wrapped in his own thoughts to bother until the other seized his elbow and hissed at him. Then he came out of his daydreams. Something was going on—the Councilors were paying too careful attention, and the Earth Delegation didn't look right! In a second, his mind was back on the speech, and the words came to a chilling focus in his ears.

"...found the organization inconceivably complex. And yet the basic pattern is old—old as the barbarism that prompted it. Gentlemen, I have only my word as evidence now, but I can name names and give exact locations that will enable our Planetary Police to confirm every word of it before night falls on this meeting. The Plutarch of Earth, on the twentieth of April, forty-two years ago, gave the following orders, which I quote..."

Fleigh grabbed for Slim's generator, and yanked the button savagely, but still the damning words went on, detail piling on exact detail, while Secret Servicemen moved forward to cut the speaker off from the Earth Delegates. Their rudeness was an open declaration that Earth was immediately severed from the Council! Max ripped out the generator, crushing the delicate tubes in his hands. He was stamping on his own device at the same time, but the voice went on unchecked!

Down on the floor, Curtis looked upwards without pausing in his detailed list of evidence, found the operative's eye, and grinned. Then he resumed his normal gravity and went on!

Slim's hands were trembling and fumbling over his charm. Fleigh practically carried him to the aisle, and dragged him along as he made his way up the infinite distance to the gallery door. Every step was made with the expectation of a shouted order from Curtis that would send the big explosive slugs tearing through him, but it did not come. Instead, there was only the quiet continuance of the speech, and Slim's hoarse prayers to the ghosts of the charm to save them.

Surprisingly, the doors opened in the hands of the courteous guards, and the hall was before them, with no police in sight. Max cut Slim's babbled relief off with a crisp whisper. "We're not out of it, you fool! Ten to one, it's cat and mouse, with us the losers. But if we're going to make use of the tenth chance, shut up! Walk, damn it, and *grin!*"

There was another flight of stairs leading down, a long hall, and a second door that opened promptly and politely as they neared it. Then the main steps led down to the street. It was impossible that the simulacrum could have given no orders for their arrest; as impossible as that the relay could be tampered with! But the big car waited at the curb, and there were still no police.

Reaction left Slim drooling narcotic juice over the hands that were caressing and kissing the charm. Fleigh yanked him savagely into the car and gunned the electros. It went tearing out into the street under full power, while a wild yell of despair ripped out of the outlaw's throat.

"My ghost charm!" He was pawing frantically at the door lock, with his face swiveled around toward the bright receding twinkle of the metal piece on the sidewalk behind. "Max! Max!"

"Shut up and stay put! There must be a hundred more of those things you can buy if we get out of this." Fleigh freed a hand and forced the cringing fool back into the seat, where he relaxed woodenly, terror fading out to sullen despair that gradually mingled with doubt.

"Then let's get out quick, Max! Once we hit Earth, I know a guy's got another. Tain't as good a ghost with it as mine, but it ain't no fake, neither! You gotta give me enough to get it, Max!"

Fleigh hid his thin grin from the other. They'd need more than a ghost charm or even planning if they ever went to Earth! He'd seen what happened to failures there, and he knew that it would be better to walk into the nearest Planet Police Bureau. But he reached over soothingly and patted the outlaw's shoulder. "Sure, Slim. We'll get you another, maybe before we leave here."

It shouldn't be hard to find one of the charm peddlers, and dope up a story. There was a place on Venus where they could hide, once Slim worked up his nerve to pilot them there—and provided that their luck held long enough to keep the police from impounding the little craft. But the hideout would take money, and that had to come first. Planning took care of that; he'd always been careful to avoid tying his personal fortune up in the Earth Operative strongholds.

He swung the car around a corner, glanced up at a jeweler's sign, and cursed without slowing down. The red light was on, warning that it had been raided. One of his secret quarters gone!

He stopped obediently for a through highway, and roared on. But the second was no better. There was sweat on his forehead, and his hands were slippery with it when he headed out Mars Center Canal into the suburbs. Damn Curtis! It was impossible for him to have found the hideout—or should have been!

But there was no warning light in the window of the third and last place. The lawyer's faded sign swung in the thin wind, and everything was serenely peaceful. Fleigh jerked Slim out of the car, set its automatic chauffeur, and let it go rolling off.

Then he moved up the steps with the outlaw at his heels, listened cautiously at the door, and nodded. The steady click of a typewriter indicated that the scrawny little secretary was doing the routine office-work, and Sammy must have been undisturbed. He opened the door eagerly, to a louder clicking from the typewriter.

Above it, Curtis looked up with an assured smile, and waved the grandfather of all hand weapons at him in genial greeting!

"Come in, Max," he said cordially. "Like my double's speech?"

Slim's trembling hand fumbled out automatically in the sign of the horns. His blanched mouth worked furiously, but the words refused to come until Curtis turned to him. Then jerked back, waving his fingers. "He couldn'ta…We'd of beat him…*Max!* He's dead! He's a ghost!"

Fleigh's hand groped for him, and missed. Another apparition came into the room from the inner office. This one was a shriveled, little man, with owl-eyes that blinked at them out of thick-lensed spectacles. Jeremiah Greek picked up a pencil with a contented grin, drew it across the bare flesh of his arm; and held the red mark that rose on the skin out toward the outlaw.

"In the flesh," he stated.

But Slim was no longer listening. Slowly, as if moved by worn-down clock-works, he slid down the wall and his dead-faced head bent forward to meet the knees that drew upwards. There he stayed, motionless.

"If that's catatonic return to the foetal position, it's an all-time record for speed," Curtis commented with quiet interest. "Sit down, Max. You seem to have overestimated your companion's moral fiber, and underestimated your opponent's. Never count on luck! It takes planning to get anywhere in this universe…By the way, Jeremiah Greek is the original inventor of pancyclic tape: you should have checked up on him, before you trusted him, and found out the way your Plutarchy gypped him out of his invention. He wasn't the sort of man who'd cooperate very well with Earth. In fact, he was the sort who could and would fake a tape for your recorder to cover up the call he put in under my code to the Martian Council!"

Fleigh moved toward the chair as the gun commanded, only half conscious of the words. He sank into a sitting position, his mind churning savagely and getting nowhere. *Play along! Keep your eyes open! If you let the other guy make the moves, he'll slip up somewhere.* It was basic training to operatives, though there was uncertainty in even that logic now. But there was nothing else to do.

Greek picked up the account. "With a promise of secrecy from Councilor Curtis, and a chance to do legitimate research here, I felt quite free to drop my very doubtful loyalty to my native planet, Mr. Fleigh. Those two simulacra you shot were crude, and the brain and blood imitation was quite poor, I thought. But fortunately, you didn't investigate thoroughly."

"I didn't think the relay control could fail. So you simply let the simulacrum collapse and took its place?" Fleigh was forcing himself to casualness while his brain hashed over all the rules for upsetting a trap. But it returned inevitably to the basic need of stalling for time, and keeping them talking.

"Not at all," Curtis corrected him. "We were late returning, so they simply used an all-wave receiver to record your control signal on pancyclic tape, inserted it into a generator, and the simulacrum had his freedom in his pocket two minutes after you turned on your control in the Council Chamber. You really didn't think I'd leave my speech in the middle to chase you, when I had a perfectly good double, surely?"

Fleigh's eyes darted to Slim, but there would be no help from that quarter. Not a muscle had moved since the outlaw had collapsed onto the floor!

He forced himself to relax deliberately. Relax! As long as he was tensed up in the chair, they'd watch him, but they'd be less cautious if he seemed to abandon hope. And he was younger and faster than they were, in spite of his fat.

Greek's amused cackle broke his chain of thought. "So simple a solution, Max! But of course, an involute brain would miss just that...That's fine, relax! And when you start anything, you'll be surprised to find how quickly and efficiently a couple of sentimental visionary fools can shoot! Or do you think, Councilor, that we're really such fools?"

"I doubt it," Curtis answered, with the same hard amusement in his voice. "As I see it, a reactionary is simply unable to adapt to new conditions; he's filled with a blind, stubborn dependence on the rude past. And brute force is an admission of that intellectual poverty. Max, you should have studied history better. The addle-pated idealists have a peculiar habit of winning."

They stood there, grinning and studying their captive with the one thing in the universe he had never encountered—open contempt. Fleigh wet his lips, glancing from one to the other, and considering the hopeless distance to the door.

And suddenly the beginnings of an idea permeated through the hard knot of fear in his brain. They didn't believe in brute force! They wouldn't kill him without provocation; and they couldn't turn him in to the police!

He swung back to Curtis, and this time there was a grin on his own lips. "You said you promised Mr. Greek secrecy, Councilor. Not immunity, because the old law against making robots is too strong; and simulacra would be considered robots. Well, just how do you figure you can turn me over to the authorities without breaking that promise and having him strung up beside me?"

"I never meant to turn you in," Curtis answered.

"And you said yourself that brute force was stupid!"

"Quite true." It was Greek who answered this time. "But the rules of justice sometimes invoke it. The penalty for treason, like that for robotry, is still death, though we've abandoned most other reasons for capital punishment."

"Then turn me in! Or kill me yourselves—and you'll find that brute force really is stupid on Mars! The police here are the best in the system, which is why I always preferred to do my little jobs elsewhere. You amateurs wouldn't have a chance. Well?"

But he knew that he had them, and the taste of freedom in his mouth was sweet after the fear and hopelessness of their gloating power. He did not wait for an answering nod from them, but turned from his chair in calm assurance, and headed for the door.

Greek's voice interrupted his exit. "Just a minute, Max! You really should know all your mistakes, and there's one we forgot…Never use a perfect simulacrum! It can't be perfect without thinking exactly like its original; the same mind must operate the same way. Your simulacrum was limited only by the time it could exist—and it knew that, as well as knowing it was useless among real men!"

"So what?" Fleigh asked jauntily, and reached for the door. "And so long!"

Steel hands grabbed him, and a pair of arms with inhuman strength picked him up and turned him around to face the two men. Curtis dropped his gun onto the table with a slow, deliberate motion, holding the struggling operative with a single hand, while he stretched the other out to Jeremiah Greek. Then he turned toward the door, dragging the fat body of Fleigh along without effort.

"So when you're found dead in your house, killed by the robot you were having built in some fiendish plot against Councilor Curtis. I don't think the police will worry—beyond seeing that both you and the robot are thoroughly beyond repair!"

There was bitterness in the voice of the simulacrum, but it was resolute and determined bitterness. "When the real Curtis replaced me in the Council Chamber, he meant to make my few days of existence as pleasant as possible. But even a limited simulacrum likes to be useful. Come along, Max."

Max Fleigh went along; there was nothing else he could do, as the duplicate of Curtis tossed him into a small car and began driving back toward the town and the house that had been his Martian home and would soon be his tomb. He couldn't even think straight, for his head insisted on dwelling on nonsense.

Slim had been right, after all, and his ghost charm had brought him luck, even after he lost it. But for the man who had refused to believe in it, there was no hope for such insane oblivion. There was simply no hope of any kind.

Divine Right

The cybernetics wing of Eos Institute lay in the shadow of the central tower, where even the faint twilight failed to reach it. Most of the building was dark in the lull of annual finals. The successful students were out celebrating their newly created Fellowships; those who had failed were already gone, to make whatever they could of their doctorates. Only a few lights shone from windows here and there as neophyte Fellows cleaned out their laboratories or grew accustomed in private to the official masks that proved their rank.

The lights were on in the room where Mark Saxon waited, but there was no mask to conceal his blond, square-cut face or cover the sterility symbol tattooed on his forehead. He was rubbing the mark unconsciously now while his big body was slumped in front of the humming computer. Then, as two rows of symbols began forming on the panel, he groaned faintly and swung away.

He snapped off the lights and power and turned toward the laboratory window, gazing across the parklands around the Institute. The palace of the World Custodian lay beyond, already bathed in a rosy flood of light. Above the dome, the great figure of a masked Minerva poised, eager body and arms stretched toward the east, as if reaching for the dawn. Mark stared at it, as he had done a thousand nights before, but this time the inspiration was lacking in the sight.

Abruptly, the musical tone of the phone sounded. Mark swiveled to reach the receiver and saw the little panel light up with the pleasantly plain face of Letty, receptionist and general girl Friday for this floor.

"Dr. Saxon?" She bent closer, trying to make out his face, and worry quickened on her own features. "Mark, you shouldn't be sitting alone in the dark!"

He shrugged. "I'm all right, Letty. Any word from the dean?"

The question was more automatic than hopeful, though. He'd put in his appeal for a continuation of his research project weeks before, when he finally realized he couldn't complete it this term. It was too much to hope for any action now, at the end of the final day.

"Not yet, Mark. But the dean hasn't left yet, so there's still time." Letty was determined to sound optimistic, though she must have known as well as he how little chance he had. "Fellow Northrup wants you to see him, though."

Mark shrugged again. Northrup had made overtures of friendship before, but the young Fellow somehow rubbed Mark the wrong way. There was an air of too sure familiarity mixed with a peculiar attitude that might have been normal for an older brother in his advances. Besides, it wasn't normal for a Fellow to associate too closely with a mere doctor. "Anything else?" he asked.

"There's a box of books and papers from Central Files for you being sent up. And the janitor wants to know when he can start cleaning out your lab. I told him he could just wait until your time's up at midnight."

"Thanks," he told her, and hung up. It fitted. He'd waited two months for the material from Central Files, but they weren't ready here to wait five more hours for him to leave.

He sighed and dropped back to his seat in front of the computer, switching it on, staring at the impossibly duplicated rows of symbols that appeared. One row represented a supposedly exact mathematical analysis of the personality of the current Custodian; the second did the same for another Custodian who had been in office over a hundred years ago. Yet the two were identical. Either his three years of work here was a failure, or else Custody was in the hands of an immortal man!

It was utter nonsense. It was an idea from the degraded depths of rumors spawned by the anarchistic Ruddies. Only malcontents driven to fantastic fantasies by their sterility could believe such things about the Custodian.

Automatically, Mark's fingers went up to touch the tattoo on his forehead, and he winced. Then he shook his head. He wasn't unbalanced by his sterility. He'd learned to accept it without even attempting to avoid looking at the mark that had been put there after his routine examination when he was fourteen. With a fifth of all children born completely sterile after the final wars, the race had been forced to separate them publicly, and Mark had realized the need of his tattoo. It wasn't the first shock in his life.

He'd been orphaned in one of the political upsets of his section. After he'd adjusted to the Custodial home, he'd been ripped out for a series of examinations and then given to the guardianship of a Fellow who kept him isolated from all playmates. Finally, when he'd learned to love the man, "Uncle Will" had been sent to one of the Custodial Hermitages with almost no warning and no hope of any further contact. The knowledge of sterility had only been another in a series of events that separated him from the human race. He'd bottled his bitterness away in his brain with the loneliness of his whole life, submerging it under his fight for acceptance into the Institute and the Fellowship that would justify his existence.

Now was no time to drift back into childish fantasies of immortality, where the divine right of survival couldn't be denied. He had to admit that either his data or his methods were wrong. Given time, he could find the error, then. But not in the five hours until midnight!

As if in answer to his thoughts, the phone hummed again. This time, Letty was smiling. "Mark, good news! Dean Grisholm wants to see you in his office, at once! It must mean—"

"It doesn't mean anything yet," he told her. He'd long since learned to avoid hope without good reason, and this late reprieve offered little encouragement. But at her hurt look, he forced his voice to a more cheerful tone. "Maybe it will, though. Wish me luck, Letty!"

She crossed her fingers quickly, before cutting off. Mark gathered up the papers that were to have been his final proof, staring again at the rows of symbols on the panel. For a second, he reached for a blank sheet of paper, intending to add them to his notes. But the results were too fantastic. He hadn't claimed complete success, so there would be no dishonesty in omitting this. Some things had to wait until they could be explained—if he ever got a chance to find an explanation. He cut off power and headed out into the hall, toward the elevator that would take him to the top of the central tower, where the dean's offices were.

The clerical help was gone when he reached them, but the door was open to the inner office, and he could see Grisholm sitting at his desk. The man was a short, stout Santa Claus type, with his face hidden by a grizzled beard and the Fellowship mask over it. Mark had heard rumors that his appointment four years before by the new Custodian was resented by other Fellows; the man's previous career had been something of a mystery, beyond his listing in the graduate rolls. The students seldom saw him, except for the sight of him moving to and from his house in the park outside.

Now he looked up and his lips parted in a brief smile. "Come on in, Mark. Thought I'd recognize that towhead, though it's twenty years since I sat in on the examination for you. Not many blonds born these days." He thrust out a plump hand, then motioned to a chair as if Mark were more than a mere doctor. "Now what's all this about appealing for an extension on your research? Any proof the added time will let you finish?"

Mark handed the papers across, trying to remember the man. But that whole early examination was a blur, as if hypnotic erasure had been used.

He'd never discovered the purpose of the test, though he'd learned that many of the students here had gone through a similar experience.

Grisholm dropped the papers after a quick glance. "Suppose you summarize. You were reversing normal information theory practice, as I get it, trying to find the factors in language which have significance only to the personality. Trying to find how personality shapes speech. Psychic bits, eh? Right?"

"Roughly, yes." Stated so baldly, it robbed the work of the subtlety of its departure from standard information analysis, but it was accurate enough. His original monograph lay on the dean's desk, and he indicated it, trying to summarize his improvements. In the last two months, he'd found the fruitful attack he'd been seeking. Except for the one case—which still might be due to faulty data—he'd rebuilt his computer and organized his methods so well that he could get a positive index of a man's individuality from as little as five hundred words of his writing, even when the writer tried to change his style. He'd spotted pen names the writers believed to be completely secret and repeatedly matched writing samples against the writers.

"All this in the last two months since your original report?" Grisholm asked skeptically. "After three years on that?"

"I had help," Mark told him. Letty had slaved night after night in the converted cellar of her house to finish the important filing and cross-checking, and she'd even persuaded several of her friends to help. "I'd have gotten even further on regular research time if my requests for aid from the clerical pool hadn't been denied!"

Grisholm grinned wryly. "You covered that pretty thoroughly in your petition. It read as if the whole Institute had been conspiring to keep you from finishing. No, never mind—I'm not offended. Maybe you were short-changed a little. We ran into more demands on the pool than usual this year, and I had to allocate help where it seemed most productive."

He waited, as if expecting a protest. Mark let it ride, and Grisholm shrugged before going on. "You had an interesting line of research, but hardly useful except as pure knowledge. Maybe it matters academically who wrote what of Shakespeare, but it won't solve any important world problems. You mentioned something of great importance in your original application, but I don't think you really knew of such a thing. Or did you?"

"I was going to use identity proof to disprove the Ruddy rumors about the Custodian being an immortal man, using us all," Mark answered. There was no way of knowing how the slanderous stories of transplanted brains and other atrocities had begun, any more than the lies about the Fellows planning to move to the Moon and blast the Earth. But it had bothered him as a child, and no story was too wild for some of the adult people to swallow.

Then he jerked as he remembered the symbols on his computer panel abruptly. Now he'd probably have to tell the whole business and—

"Dr. Saxon!" Grisholm's eyes were cold and sharp behind the mask. "Some things don't need disproof, I might remind you! If you are trying to make your work something that affects the Custodian so you can appeal over my head, you'll have to do better than that!"

"I wasn't trying anything!"

The dean's eyes grew even sharper. "Um-m-m. You're sterile, I see. There's some evidence of a feeling of persecution in your petition. Now you show an overconcern with immortality. We usually weed out all cases of sterility paranoia, but—"

"I protest!" Mark found himself on his feet, his hands clenched, his blood pounding against his temples. "You have no right!"

Suddenly Grisholm's body relaxed and he leaned back in his chair, chuckling. "Trapped, damn it! Very clever, Mark. You needled me into showing what might be called personal prejudice against you, so I guess you can invoke your right to protest directly to the Custodian. All right, you win. But first, let me show you something."

He leaned forward to the scanner that connected to the Central File, pulling out a complex electronic key and inserting it while he tapped out a code on the indexer. "This is from the secret files, so I'll need your promise not to speak of it to anyone."

Mark nodded, forcing himself back to his chair while his blood pressure began dropping to normal. He hadn't meant anything clever; he hadn't even remembered the rule on personal prejudice. But he could not let the chance go, since he suspected that some measure of real prejudice was involved.

Grisholm spun through the index that appeared on the screen and grunted as he found something. "Here, take a look at this."

Slipping by on the screen was a student's report, dated nearly a hundred years before. Clumsy, roundabout and in strange symbols, it still duplicated most of Mark's work!

"I should have been told of this," Mark protested.

Grisholm released the index. "No reason. We've found duplicate projects sometimes pay off handsomely. You're judged on what you do with a line of work, not how much has been covered before. But in this case, there was also an appeal to the Custodian—and Fellowship was withheld. Precedent's against you. Besides, from such an appeal you get only unqualified acceptance or rejection. On the other hand, even if I fail you, I can give you a recommendation of merit. That will make things a lot easier for you."

"I still appeal," Mark told him. He was sure now that Grisholm didn't mean to give him an extension; the whole argument could have been ended too easily by simply agreeing to that.

Grisholm reached for a rubber stamp, slapped it on Mark's report, and signed quickly, before dropping the papers down one of the slots on his desk. "All right, that's it. You'll get a three-day extension here, automatically, until your appeal is heard. Now let's get out of here. My cook's been waiting supper for hours. Here, I'll take you down with me."

He flicked off the lights and touched a button that opened a small door to a private elevator. He seemed in the best spirits in the world, more than ever like a genial Santa Claus left over from Christmas. It was all wrong for a man over whose head an appeal had been forced, and it worried Mark, though he tried to mumble his thanks.

Grisholm brushed the words aside as they reached the ground floor. "Forget it, boy. Why not join me for dinner? Now that your fate's out of my hands, there's no reason against it." He smiled, as if it were some unusually good joke. "At my age, a man needs young company once in a while."

"Thank you," Mark said awkwardly. He groped for a reason to refuse and seized on the first polite lie he could think of. "But I've already got a date."

Grisholm nodded, the amusement on his face deepening. "Of course, of course. Don't let me keep you, then."

He stood watching as Mark moved away, ruining the younger man's idea of returning to his laboratory. Maybe it was just as well, though. It was well past dinnertime.

Mark headed toward the all-night tavern just outside the Institute grounds, trying to make sense of Grisholm's behavior and failing. He was also bothered by the fact that the earlier report had been in the secret files. It didn't make logic. Even that could have been used to end some of the rumors about the Custodian—unless it also indicated the presence of an immortal dictator over them!

He cursed at the thought and threw it savagely out of his mind.

Immortality was impossible. Besides, it would ruin the whole integrity of the Custody. Without that, there was no hope of preventing the full descent of another dark age. It was bad enough now, but without the protection of Custody—

Even Twentieth Century men who studied the complex patterns of historic cycles had seen that such an age was coming. The signs of increasing conformity, mass fads, surrender of individual rights and anti-intellectualism had all been there. The pendulum of history swung from Hellenism through Rome to the Middle Ages, then back through the Renaissance to the Revolution of Science, while excesses of folly or brutality at the extremes repeatedly proved ruinous.

Now, with too much technology, the risk of another relapse into neo-feudal power thinking was unthinkable, as the brief horrors of the final wars had proved.

Out of desperation, the Custody had been created after those wars. Progress must go on, though many of the new discoveries would have to be restricted to the few who could accept them safely. Every scrap of sociological knowledge must be used to control the coming darkness and prepare for the needed smooth transition to another age of advancement. This time, intellectual apathy must not be accompanied by the physical brutality of constant power struggles. The Institute was founded to select a few suitable Fellows, with one of their number chosen for a single term each twenty years as World Custodian. Originally, the office had been chiefly advisory, but time and the follies of local rulers had turned it into the effective government of the world.

The town beyond the Institute showed that the theory was working, too. Old and overcrowded, there was still a measure of law and sanitation. The people were dulled and crushed under a self-imposed burden of tradition, superstition, and disregard of human values. They were only too willing to be relieved of their problems by handing over all their rights to anyone who would rule. But through the control of Custody, their rights had never been completely abandoned. There had been no return of serfdom, inquisitions, torture chambers or crusades.

No matter what his computer showed, Mark had to trust in the integrity of the Custodian.

The tavern was almost deserted, and a sign announced that the kitchen was closed. Mark found a table and waited while the barman finished some argument with the single waiter about horoscopes, then gave his order for yeastburger and beer. One of the tavern girls stuck her tattooed face over the balcony, recognized him, and went back to her room. Final week was always bad for the shops that lived off the students.

When the food finally came, it was almost as tough as his thoughts. He still couldn't understand the secret filing of the report. If it were only of academic interest, as Grisholm had said, there was no reason for any restriction on it. The only justification for hiding such work that he could see had to lie in the ridiculous stories spread by the Ruddies; since they were impossible, the whole thing was nonsense.

His brown study was interrupted by a voice beside him. "Mind if I join you, Mark?"

He looked up to see a slim young man in a Fellowship mask dropping into the opposite seat. It took a minute to recognize that it was Northrup. He hadn't meant to see the man, but it was too late to avoid him now. Mark grunted something that might pass for a greeting, resenting the need for speech.

That need was removed temporarily as the waiter rushed over, bowing obsequiously before the new arrival. "Compliments of the house, your Fellowship," he announced. A sparklingly clean glass and a bottle of wine seemed to spring into existence on the table. "Shall I open the kitchen, your Fellowship? The filet will take only a little time."

"Anything for you, Mark?" Northrup asked. He'd been a Fellow for two years, long enough to take the advantages for granted. The waiter turned to face Mark now, showing a mixture of apology and accusation for not having been warned of Mark's important friend.

Mark shook his head, and Northrup shrugged. "Just coffee for me, waiter. I was trying to get in touch with you, son."

"Letty told me," Mark admitted. He hated being called son by a man only a few years older. That name had been reserved for Uncle Will's use. "I didn't expect to see you here, though."

Northrup grinned casually. "I saw you coming this way and followed. Nothing else to do. I got tired of watching the new Fellows trying to get over the shock of passing."

"I suppose making Fellow didn't mean a thing to you?" Mark asked. Northrup's manner galled him more than it usually did.

"Hell, not much. I made sure I'd have an angle that would get me the degree. I knew I'd make it, so why get all excited over it?"

"Must be nice to have a sure line of research!"

Northrup had his original doctorate in brain histology, as Mark remembered. He'd been doing Fellowship work on something about the physical mechanism for storing memories.

Now his grin deepened. "Maybe I'd have made it on the research. I pretty well proved that the human brain can hold a thousand times more than anybody figured—enough for a thousand lifetimes and plenty to spare. But I wasn't counting on it being enough. I was figuring the Custodian would get me passed after I fixed up his dog. Oh, forget it. I didn't come here to brag. Mark, I've got a proposition for you."

He leaned forward, the smile slipping from his lips, while the visible part of his face took on an almost fatherly look. "I've stumbled on an idea Grisholm's crazy about—so good it means pure research with no administrative work. I want you to help me with it, son! It means top pay—and at least some chance for an honorary Fellowship some day! More than you can expect anywhere else!"

That wouldn't be hard, Mark realized. He wasn't ready for the usual work open to an educated sterile male. He might get a job in Data Reduction at a local Custody branch, with a minor administrative post in twenty years. Or some local prince might take him under patronage, since he'd attended the Institute—though no sterile man could marry his way into the governing lines, of course. Or he could take the vows and retire to a Custody Archive, if they'd have him. Northrup's offer sounded much too good—suspiciously so.

"Thanks, but I haven't officially failed yet," he reminded the other. He fumbled momentarily, hunting for a way out of the need of a decision. "What's your new project got to do with the Custodian's dog?"

Northrup laughed. "Nothing, of course. That was just insurance on getting a degree, before I ever thought of the project. But you know about the dogs?"

Everyone knew about them, of course. For as long as could be remembered, each Custodian had carried on the tradition of having two large dogs with him at all times in preference to other bodyguards. There were groups of legends about the remarkable intelligence such dogs developed.

"Well, I was lucky. One of his mutts got run over badly when I was near enough to reach it. So I found a young dog and switched brains. Any good brain man could have done it, but most of them won't touch animals, of course. So the Custodian was properly grateful, and here I am in my mask."

"That operation—it can be done to human brains?" Mark asked thickly. He could feel the pulse drumming in his throat, like the sudden ugly throb of suspicion in his mind. He reached for his beer to cover his reaction, but his hands shook as he lifted the glass.

Northrup seemed not to notice. "Why not? They developed it in the final wars. Tricky work, but no more impossible than grafting skin from person to person. Brains don't store well, but we sometimes get accident cases where we make the switch." His lips curled in sudden amusement. "Probably that's the source of those Ruddy immortality lies. They seem to think grafting on a young body will rejuvenate an old brain."

"It doesn't?"

"Of course not, son. Or maybe it does, a little, but not enough to matter. I read somewhere they tried to make it work that way, once, but nothing came of it. A good thing, too. Make everyone start hunting bodies and where'd the race get?" Northrup finished his coffee and got to his feet. "Well, think over my offer. If you don't wangle the degree, look me up."

"I'll do that. And thanks, Northrup," Mark told him with careful friendliness. He watched the Fellow move toward the door, where the waiter was hastening to open the way for him. Then, after a decent wait, he left his bill and tip and headed back to the Institute.

He knew what he had to do now. The thoughts in his mind made him sick, but there was too much evidence now to be dismissed. The ability to transplant brains fitted too well with the ancient rumors, the evidence on his computer, and the hiding of the one method which might end such doubts. Northrup had indicated that no immortality could come of an operation, and Mark prayed he was right, but too many impossible things had already been done; rejuvenation couldn't be completely ruled out as long as secrets could be locked away so easily at the Custodian's desire.

This time he locked the door after entering his laboratory, contrary to his usual practice. The box of material from Central Files had been delivered, he saw with relief. Most of it would be useless in the time he probably had, but what he needed should be there. He pawed through it hastily, scanning the titles on the reels of tape, then nodded. The tape of Custodians' speeches through the centuries was there; he'd meant to use it as his final triumph, to end the rumors forever. Now—

He ripped the tape from the can and fed it into the reader on the computer, picking out thousand-word sections for each of the Custodians at random. Twenty-one of the twenty-three who had served were represented. The computer clucked away, filing the sections in its memory circuits and beginning the complicated analysis needed to break down the individuality of each writer.

Now doubts crept back as he sat waiting for the results. Negative evidence might prove nothing, since many great men had used professional men to write their speeches; traditionally, the Custodian wrote his own copy, but there was no proof of that. Also there was no sure way to estimate what changes might occur in an individual who lived through centuries of time. He'd been naive to think he could prove anything. Maybe the Custodian had been right in storing the method in the secret file.

Then finally the machine began spilling out its answers. Mark copied them, one below another, as they appeared. At first inspection, there seemed no exact correlation. But as Mark studied the rows of symbols more closely, his last doubts vanished.

From speech to speech, except for the two oldest Custodians, there were too many similarities. The differences were only slightly greater than those between a man's normal earliest and latest writing, and those were probably caused by outside help with the first drafts. There was no question of continuity in Mark's mind as he finished.

For four hundred years, the same man had occupied the palace of the Custodian! The twenty-year limitation had become a mockery. And the office that was to lead the world back to a better future had been corrupted into the greatest seizure of power in all history.

It was a monstrous joke on humanity. And it could only be the end of all their hopes. An immortal, long since skilled in getting only himself re-elected, with centuries in which to establish his absolute control! A man who would never be so foolish as to give up any of that power by letting humanity regain the lost love of freedom. A man to whom the status quo meant the best of all worlds, however bad it might be for those under him!

For a second, Mark sat with the damning evidence in his hands, while fear and sickness washed over him. He should destroy it at once, of course. It was no business of his. Even without Fellowship, there was Northrup's offer. Whatever the Custodian might be would have no effect on his life. As for the future—well, what had a sterile man to worry about that? There'd be none of his blood in the generations that would suffer for this!

But the picture of one man living forever in a world where nearly a quarter of the population was denied even racial immortality was too monstrous. Mark stood up abruptly, shoving the reel of tape and his answers into a small brief case, along with the carbon of his research paper. It was evidence against the fraudulent practice of Custody, and somehow it must be used.

Unfortunately, it wasn't enough. As long as nobody could prove immortality was possible, this could be explained away by any clever man: Prescribed ritual that made all Custodial writing identical—any of a hundred explanations. And the answer to how it was done would lie stored away in the secret files where nobody could find it. The only, final proof would have to come from one of the half hundred men on Earth who had the secret of those files—and no man in such a position would give up his power for any idle dream of integrity; in four hundred years, the Custodian would have learned how to pick his men better than that!

Mark didn't even know which Fellows were trusted, except for the Custodian himself and Dean Grisholm.

Grisholm's scanner! And it hadn't been cut off, as far as Mark could remember. The dean had released the indexer, but he'd left without removing his key or switching off power. In the case of an ordinary scanner, it would still be working. It seemed incredible that it should have been left open to the secret files, yet most of the older Fellows grew careless in the confidence their positions inspired.

Only a fool would risk it, Mark knew. There might be an alarm that would be triggered after an automatic cutoff. The whole office might be a trap, once the dean left it, and no explanation would account for his entering. For that matter, the cleaning staff had probably locked up after themselves. Unless the private elevator would open for him, his chances of getting in were pretty weak. Yet somehow he knew he had to try it.

He hastily crammed sheets of self-printing paper into his bag and stepped cautiously into the hall, already feeling a thickness in his throat at what he planned. Everything seemed deserted, even to the booth where Letty worked. He heard the cleaning staff busy somewhere above him, but they had already worked their way down from the upper floors. He moved through the empty halls, feeling that a Custody policeman was staring at him from every corner.

There was still no sign of a guard when he reached the elevator door, however. He pressed the button that was worked into the ornamental scroll, holding his breath, ready to run at the sound of an alarm. The door opened quietly, to reveal the little cage waiting. It closed silently as he touched the top button, and the elevator began rising smoothly. A few seconds later, he stood in the darkened office.

He'd forgotten that there would be no lights, or that he couldn't switch them on without the danger of attracting attention. Then, as his eyes adjusted, he saw that some illumination came through a transom from the hall. He listened again for the cleaning staff and fumbled his way to the scanner. He could hear his blood pounding in his ears now, and his hands were slippery and cold as he reached carefully for the indexer control. There was still time to back out. With luck, he could leave without being seen. Then it was too late as his finger pressed down on the button.

There was no alarm he could hear. Light came on, softly illuminating the panel, and the index began sliding by slowly. It was too short for the general index, indicating that it was still adjusted to the secret files!

He speeded it up, passing through the alphabet to "I." Identification—he hesitated at that, then went on; illusion, immaculation; immortality. He pressed for subheadings, waiting until *Means to achieve.*

There were seven listings under that! He took them in order of dates. The oldest was for suspended animation, and he rejected it quickly as being effectively useless. Then there was one that produced continuous growth as a side effect. The third seemed to have nothing to do with the subject.

He started to reject it, then hesitated; it would be a logical step to bury the real method in such apparent irrelevancy. He skimmed through the report, which dealt with a sort of electronic educator; it was a development of the idea of the hypnophone-encephaloscriber, designed to force knowledge directly from the mind of the teacher to that of the student or students. Apparently any amount of knowledge could be passed on in that way.

Remembering the long years and effort that had gone into his own education, Mark grimaced bitterly. Here, potentially, lay the answer to educating the whole race out of their slump. The new dark ages could have been ended almost at once. Yet it lay buried in the files, kept from use by the Custodian who had been appointed to further the ending of man's relapse!

But it had nothing to do with the subject. He puzzled over that, looking for some clue, until the very end of the paper. There, in a brief summary, the researcher had indicated that through the use of the machine, knowledge might be made truly immortal. It was the sort of thing that had made cross-indexing so complicated that only electronic machines could handle it. Mark shoved the reject button and went on to the next entry.

He bent forward sharply at the title of the paper and began skimming it rapidly. There was no doubt now. This was the answer to Northrup's objections—a method of insuring the rejuvenation of brain tissue through multiple transplantation!

He began copying it now, using the self-printing paper he had brought, no longer bothering to read. He had his proof—a ghastly proof that meant the death of three brains each time the Custodian was rejuvenated, since they obviously would not be replaced in other bodies to threaten exposure through their horror-won knowledge. Four hundred years of immortality, won by the butchering of how many other men? What sort of a monster must the Custodian be by now?

Mark's hands were shaking as he stuffed the sheets of copy into his brief case. He zipped it closed and reached for the indexer, to leave it as it had been. His finger touched the button, and then stopped, while cold shock washed over him.

The pages on the screen were gone. In their place, pale eyes stared out through a silver mask, while a pair of amused lips opened like a cat about to hiss at a captured mouse. The symbol on the mask was that of the Custodian!

Mark hit the button frantically, but the face remained on the screen. And now there was a voice from a speaker somewhere inside the machine. "Mark Saxon, I believe? My guards are on their way to escort you to me. You'll make things much simpler by waiting quietly for them. It seems we have a few things to discuss."

The face vanished and the screen went dark. For a second, Mark stood paralyzed. Then he grabbed his bag and darted for the private elevator. However slim his chances, he had to try to escape, at least until he could spread his information! The door seemed to take forever to open, and the little cage hardly seemed to move as he started downward. But if they didn't know he was using it, it might improve his chances.

He studied the row of buttons, counting them. The number indicated that the elevator ran to the subbasement of the Institute, rather than just to the ground floor, and he pushed the lowest one. Like most of the students, he'd spent some time in the lower basements during the first-year period of hazing.

From outside the shaft, there was the sound of hard heels pounding across the entrance hall. The guards must have arrived. If they tried to use the private elevator—

But apparently they hadn't been told of that. The cage dropped downwards, while the commotion above faded. Then the door was opening, and the dank smell of the basement hit his nostrils. For the moment, he seemed to have eluded pursuit. It wouldn't matter in the long run. He was sick with the knowledge that he could have no hope of escaping the search of the Custodian for more than a few days, and that his attempts might only make whatever horror faced him even worse. But a queer determination carried him on.

He twisted through the maze of the basement, looking for something he could identify. Finally, one corridor number placed him, and he nodded. He'd followed it before, escaping a hazing party, and he knew the way now. He could only hope that no guards were waiting at the end, where it connected with the subway tunnels.

He was in luck. There were no guards, and one of the irregular evening trains was already in the station as he dashed across it, running for the nearer of the two cars. The door clattered shut behind him and the train rumbled away. Around him, a group of citizens stared at his tattoo with hard eyes, then spotted his student insignia, and went on with their conversation. Apparently they were on their way to break up a group of Ruddies whose hideout had been spotted. The Custody frowned on torturing the malcontents beyond certain limits, but the men were fingering their clubs fondly in anticipation of the fun to come.

Mark considered the Ruddies, but his mind rejected the idea of joining them almost at once. Officially, they were permitted as a necessary enemy for the citizenry to feel superior to; their presence made it easy to channel off some of the normal animosity of the times from more dangerous subjects. Actually, they served as a convenient place for the planting of informers, and Mark's presence among them would probably be reported almost at once.

He shoved his way out at the third stop. He couldn't return to his room, but he had to have some place to organize himself. The only place he could think of was the basement of Letty's house, where they had set up the equipment for the effort to finish his work. It had a typewriter and copying supplies he'd need, at least.

He found a newsstand still open and picked up copies of the local paper and four others from neighboring principalities. As a university city, Aurora was more cosmopolitan than most towns. The five weren't enough, of course, but it was a start. Somehow, he had to find the addresses of every paper he could, since his only hope of getting his story released was to hit every publication and hope that one editor would take a chance. If he could get the facts before even a few hundred of the more intelligent citizens anywhere, Custody might never be able to suppress it completely.

Letty's house was dark when he reached it, as he had expected. Unlike human values, material things were treated with respect in this age of falling living standards, and electric bulbs were never burned uselessly among the citizenry. He debated waking her, then abandoned the idea; it would be better for her if she could honestly deny knowing he was there. He unlocked the entrance and went in, pulling down the heavy shutters before turning on one light. He opened the local paper, searching for the masthead page. At the Institute, he'd never bothered with papers, since the local news was no concern of his.

The editor's name and the address was there. And below it was a line in darker type: "Published under direction of Fellow J. A. Mannheim, for the Custody."

Mark swore, and grabbed for the other papers, but all had similar notices!

He should have guessed—or known; the control of all sources of information by the Custodian was hardly a secret. But the old catchwords about freedom of the press had clouded the issue, and he'd never even looked at a masthead before. Probably most readers didn't. There was no point now in sending out his facts, the censor would kill them at once.

Letters to individuals? He knew no one outside research circles, where all their interests lay with the Custody. His chance of finding even one reader of the few circulars he could send out who would do more than turn his material over to the authorities was almost nonexistent. He was hopelessly blocked at informing the world. The Custodian's grip was too secure. But there was one other method—

A faint sound brought him around in a nerve-tensed leap,

Letty stood at the head of the worn stairs, her hand on the knob and her back to him. Then, as she heard him, she turned to face him, and her smile was as thin as the worn gown she had slipped on. "Mark! I thought you were a prowler! Wait till I get some clothes on and I'll bring you some coffee."

"What did they report over television, Letty?" he asked as quietly as he could.

Surprisingly, she seemed relieved at the chance to admit that she'd heard about him. Some of the worry evaporated from her face. "Just that you'd had a breakdown—worry about your degree. That we should report you for treatment before it gets worse. Mark, I know how you must have felt. Anybody'd break down. But they want to help you. Why don't—"

"I don't want their help," he told her. "There's nothing wrong with me, Letty."

She sighed heavily, her hand hovering on the doorknob. Then she nodded, and the tight smile returned. "All right, Mark. But you look tired.

Come on up and we can…we can talk about it while you get some rest. You'll feel better then."

"I feel fine," he repeated. "I didn't break down over the degree. Letty, you know me better than that. Hell, I even had a job offer from Northrup. Come away from that door!"

"All right. Why don't you tell me all about it?" She came down a few steps.

He nodded, grimly. "You asked for it. But you won't like it. I found two men with the same individuality formula. Two separate men, Letty—"

Her sudden nervous laughter cut off his words. She choked it back at once, trying to put sympathy onto her face. "Is that all? Mark, I'm sorry. We tried to keep it from you, of course. I guess we let one case slip through. But you don't have to worry about it. We never meant to tell the dean. I suppose it was a shock, finding it and thinking he might know. But I've helped a lot of students with their work. Who cares about a few little details, when you've got so much good work to show? You don't think all that stuff about science is anything but a test of how clever you are, do you? Why, I know once when the dean himself—"

"Letty," he interrupted her flow of words. He'd never doubted her normal attitude toward science, and the familiarity of it had helped break his first shocked reaction. "Letty, what did you do with the duplicates the card sorter turned up?"

She indicated a box on one of the tables. "I've got more upstairs. I'll get them," she offered.

"No dice," he told her.

She screamed as he caught her, and then went limp. As he tied her up and gagged her loosely, she didn't even struggle. He carried her upstairs, placing her in the first room he could find, aware that she could make her way to a window and summon help eventually.

There were a couple dozen sets of duplicates when he went through the box and checked with the files. Most were cases that were easily recognized as having one member who was already listed as being dead. Immortality, it seemed, wasn't confined to the Custodian! Quite a few Fellows had been granted the boon. It must make for a nice, tight clique; and it helped to explain how someone could be found to perform the operation. One of the duplicates was Northrup.

Then he stared in amazement at another. The formula for Dean Grisholm was identical with that from the Custodian's first policy

He tried to picture the face under the mask on the scanner; it had seemed to be a thin face, while his whole impression of the dean was one of pudginess. But the fat could be simulflesh, and the mask and beard had hid his face completely. It could be the same man, leading a double life It had to be, according to the formula here. Certainly it might have advantages, and both the dean and the Custodian were known to be isolated by their work for long

No wonder Grisholm had been amused. It must have been screamingly funny to him to have Mark appeal over his head to himself!

He heard Letty dragging clumsily along the floor as he passed toward her phone, using a flashlight to find it.

But he'd have time enough before she could attract attention. He blanked the viewing pickup and dialed, hoping his memory of the number he'd been given months before was correct.

Apparently, it was. Northrup s face looked out of the screen, registering surprise at seeing no face in his own.

"This is Mark Saxon," Mark told him. "You may have heard that I'm in a jam?"

"Hi, son. Sure, I heard. What really happened? You're no nearer breakdown than I am."

"Of course not. I found an angle to get my Fellowship, that's all. I had to act a little peculiar." If Northrup knew what had happened, he'd probably assume Mark was trying to use blackmail against the Custodian, which should fit the apparent level of ethics of a man who'd sacrifice others for his own existence. "But I need a little time before I can get in touch with the Custodian's office. And I'd like to discuss it with you first."

"If I can assure you I won't call the authorities first, I suppose?" Northrup guessed.

"No chance. I've got to trust someone, and you're my only hope. Know where Letty lives?" He paused while the other nodded, then tried to act as if making up his mind. "I'll be there in about half an hour. Her basement. I've been working there. And don't let her see you come up."

He hung up without waiting for an answer. Northrup lived less than ten minutes away by car, and Letty's position was just high enough to entitle her to a two-seater. He found it in the tiny garage, shorted the ignition, and wheeled it out, grateful for the few times when his Uncle Will had let him drive, during a trip they had made. Nobody would expect a student to operate a car—particularly when the escaping student was heading back toward the Institute.

It was only seven minutes later when he buzzed at Northrup's door. "Mark," he called softly. "I changed my mind."

There was a rustle inside, but no sound of a phone being lifted. A few seconds later, the door released and the Fellow motioned him in. "I was just getting ready to leave, Mark. Come on in. Grab a drink over there. You look as if you need it." Mark took it gratefully. He was traveling on the ragged edge of his nervous energy now.

"What's all the dope?" Northrup asked. "If you're going to trust me, there's no point in stalling, son."

Mark dug the proper material from his case. "It's nasty," he warned the other. "I've got proof, though. First, this shows that brain transplanting can bring immortality. And you know something of my work, don't you? Then you'll have to take my word that Dean Grisholm is actually the same as a Custodian who lived a hundred years ago! If I can get that information to the Custodian, don't you think it deserves a Fellowship?"

"If you're right, it should," Northrup admitted. "Why not take it to him?"

"I'd never get to him. The dean has me pegged for the booby hatch."

Northrup nodded and took the papers over to the light, as if to study them carefully. The weight in his pocket might have been a gun, but he seemed to be disarmed enough to have forgotten it. The story was close enough to the truth for him to accept, and he'd probably be only too glad to arrange for Mark to meet the Custodian directly.

"Uncle Will!" Mark called softly.

Northrup turned casually. "Yeah, son?"

Then shock hit his face. His hand groped for the pocket where the gun must be, but he was too late. Mark was across the room, his big body striking the smaller man and bouncing him back over a table into a crumpled heap.

Mark yanked his jacket up over his head, pinioning his arms, until the gun had been transferred. Then he released the Fellow.

Northrup sighed and dropped into a chair, reaching for his half-finished drink. "So you found out? Smart boy. I always knew you were." His voice had altered in tone, sounding more like Mark's adopted uncle now. "Your uncle…I didn't really desert you. There was an inoperable, unsuspected hepatoma, already metastasizing. The Hermitage retirement was to permit this…well, this continuation."

"At the cost of three other lives!"

"No, Mark. You're wrong about that. Was your uncle the sort of monster that would make him? Was he, son?" He leaned back, reaching for his drink again. "Look, you're right about a lot of things. But you're wrong, too. Suppose I tell you what really happened. It's even—Wait!"

Mark wasn't waiting while the other stalled until the guards checked back here. The gunbutt slapped against Northrup's temple, bringing almost instant unconsciousness. It shouldn't have mattered, but he bent over to check the other's heart; somehow its firm beating made him feel better. The one killing he had to do was enough to worry about.

He dialed the palace, making no attempt to blank the screen this time. Ten seconds after he identified himself, he was looking at the silver mask and smiling lips of the Custodian, telling the same story he'd told Northrup, but substituting another Fellow for the dean as the immortal conspirator. It sounded pretty thin, since the Custodian should have known all such facts himself with the files at his command. But he was hoping the man would put it down to his own bad logic.

Apparently it worked. The Custodian nodded. "If you're right, of course, I'll excuse your illegal acts. And I've already decided to accept your work as proof of Fellowship rating. Where can my men…or I…meet you?"

"I'll call tomorrow noon," Mark told him. "I've got a hideout I trust, and I'm almost dead from fatigue. Besides, I want to see my name on Dean Grisholm's list of graduates in the paper tomorrow, so I'll know you mean it."

The lips under the mask firmed, and then relaxed again. "All right, Saxon. I can always cancel it, if you don't call. Only keep this to yourself!"

Mark hung up, and turned back to Northrup. He found the keys to the Fellow's car in one pocket. Then he stripped off the mask and put it on. It was what he had come here for—his passport to the inner sanctum of the Institute; the death penalty for wearing it wouldn't matter to him now, probably—and might help in preventing anyone suspecting. He carried Northrup with him gently to the bigger and newer car and drove away. He was probably being a fool again, but it would only take a few seconds to drop the man off where he would be found by the night patrol and taken in for care.

It was almost an hour later when he drove through the gate of the Institute and into the parking lot. He had driven about slowly, trying to check his plans and be sure of every step. Too much still depended on luck, but he could find nothing better.

He left the car and began walking rapidly toward the little house of Dean Grisholm. Above his head, the mockery of hope still shone on the masked figure of Minerva, and the palace of the Custodian lay only a little farther away.

Gaining entrance there would be easy—but useless. No ordinary Fellow could get through the guards and underlings. Within minutes, he would be picked up and rendered helpless. But the house of the dean was another matter. A Fellow moving toward it would be accepted, particularly on the morning before the publication of the Fellowship lists; there could be any kind of last-minute business from the Institute And the dean had neither guards nor assistants in constant attendant. His immunity to danger lay in the fact that he seemed of no great importance. Only a man who knew he was also the Custodian would offer any risk, and he must feel his tracks were covered.

Of course, he might not be there. But he would have to be seen coming from the house in the early morning, on his way to his office to deliver the official list of successful students. Not to do so would be highly unusual, and there was no reason why he should avoid it. If the house were empty now, Mark could wait.

He considered the two servants, and shook his head. Their habit of leaving each night must be legitimate; Grisholm wouldn't want anyone around when he slipped back and forth, probably.

The only problem was getting in. But that shouldn't be too difficult. There were windows leading into a basement of some sort, and it was a period house, made to look at home in the gardens and parkland around it—it must use the antique wooden frames that Uncle Will had been fond of. Removing the putty and points from that was no problem.

It was easier than that, as it turned out. The basement windows weren't even locked. Mark considered it doubtfully, but it fitted the carelessness about the scanner and elevator.

He made sure the gun was free in his pocket, then slid in. Shielding the flash, he located the steps from what seemed to be a recreation room and headed up them.

Everything was silent on the first floor. Then his ears caught the faint sound of snoring! If the dean-Custodian had already returned and gone to sleep, nothing could have been better. One single shot, and the world would be freed. There would still be the other immortals, but they must be split up to permit the Custodian's easy control of them; in the violent struggle for power that must follow the Custodian's death, the whole sordid business could come out. At least, there was a chance this way.

He hadn't thought of what must happen to himself. He refused to think of it now. He located the door from which the sounds came, tried the knob, and found it unlocked. With his gun in one hand and the flash in the other, he shoved forward.

Blinding lights hit his eyes at once. Something seemed to leap out of nowhere, and teeth raked his wrists, snapping over his hand and jarring the gun away from him. Then the lights dimmed until his shocked eyes could make out the form of one of the Custodian's dogs carrying the gun away from him. He'd forgotten about them!

"Better sit down, Mark," Grisholm's voice said, not unkindly. The man was standing across the room, smiling in amusement. "Let me look at that hand. Wolf tried to be gentle, I know, but he might have scratched the skin. Sit down! And don't try anything. These dogs are just as immortal as you think I am—they have enough experience to justify all those legends about their intelligence. Now, let's see that hand."

Mark had dropped numbly into the chair behind him, unable to think or react. His mind was frozen in a circle of broken thoughts. His finger was still trying to push at the trigger he no longer felt. But some surprise registered as Grisholm's hand caught his wrist and began examining it, before swabbing something on his skin. The pudgy hand felt real—there was no trace of simuflesh.

"Northrup's coming out of it," another voice from the doorway said quietly.

Mark's eyes jerked up unbelievingly. Standing there was a lean figure in a silver mask, and the voice was that of the Custodian!

Mark's voice was a hoarse whisper. "Two of you! But—"

"But still the same man, in many ways," Grisholm said. The dean dropped onto a couch beside the Custodian, while the two dogs seemed to confer, watching Mark from the corner of their eyes. "Oh, you're nearly right in a lot of ways, Mark. I'm actually the previous Custodian—the one who supposedly went into Hermitage. What were your plans for me, anyhow? Blackmail?"

"I was going to kill you! You filthy monster!"

Grisholm nodded happily. "I'm glad of that, Mark. A better try than I'd hoped for, too. Not your fault it failed. In this society, too few students have the mental flexibility to examine the hints of immortality we hand out. And the ones who do aren't usually able to overcome their conditioning enough to realize the direct answer is the only possible one in this society. I'm glad you didn't disappoint my faith in you."

"It won't work," Mark told him. He was trying to force cold anger over his confusion, but the best he could do was to imitate it. "I can't argue with four hundred years of cunning, but you can't convince me. A trap like this for your students may be clever, but some day the world is going to be rid of you."

The Custodian smiled faintly. "Almost my own words once. Mark, that's a day I hope won't come for centuries. No, I can't convince you now, but your own logic would in time. Look at the governors of this world. They're on the average some of our best stock. Can you imagine what one of them would do as Custodian? Sooner or later, there would be an end to the original purpose; and then Custody would be the worst means of preserving the most undesirable features of our society—with the best belief that it was the right thing to do. If the original plan is to work, the Custodian has to be a man above the attitudes of this time."

Mark fought against the argument, while it slid under his guard, mixing with his old childhood idea that the Custodian must be greater than any man could be. Superficially, it made sense. But not when the man could preserve himself through the horror of all those rejuvenations.

As if reading his thoughts, Grisholm broke in. "There is no killing, Mark. You overlooked the means, though we hoped you might understand when you spent time enough to read it—while we watched through the scanner, of course! The only practical method of immortality, such as it is, lies in the educator machine. It's far more effective than the inventor thought, you see. It's capable of transferring a whole mind into the brain of the user. Northrup has the brain he was born with—but your uncle lives on in him. And, of course, that's why there are two of us. It will work as often as desired. Mental immortality, Mark—not physical."

"Think about it," the Custodian suggested. "A sterile man should realize what it means—the divine right denied him by his body can be taken over by his mind; he can effectively be his own children! Something too good for anything but the best brains of the age! And you've qualified. We aren't offering you death or torture, but life!"

"A nice promise to whip me into line! Do you think I'd trust you?"

The Custodian shrugged. "No, I suppose not. Here." The gun lay on the table near him. Now he picked it up and handed it over. "Keep that, until you're convinced. Oh, I'm not worried about your having it—because your only chance for immortality lies with us. But if it makes you feel better, keep it trained on me until you know I'm sincere."

Mark's fingers trembled as he took the gun. It was true—immortality, the dream of every man who had ever lived, was something they could give him. His mind could be driven into body after body, perhaps through all eternity. And they might have some way of proving that all this had been simply a qualifying test for that.

He raised the gun in hands that were finally completely steady, pointing it squarely at the Custodian. Then his finger squeezed down savagely on the trigger!

Nothing happened but a muted click.

"I switched guns," Grisholm told him, and the man's lower face was beaming with a strange delight. "If you'd examined it, you'd have seen the difference. If you hadn't fired, incidentally, you'd have been given exactly what we promised—just as the others who went that far with the test have received the gift, or will receive it. Now—"

"Why'd you fire?" the Custodian asked. "Why throw away a chance like that, Mark Saxon?"

Mark fought to control the hysteria that shock on top of shock was forcing him toward. He hadn't thought. It hadn't needed thought. Was there anything better in possessing a whole brain and body than in simply removing the brain? Was the death of the donor of that brain any less real because he lived on physically when his personality died before the conquest of another and a machine? He struggled with words, trying to curse them while he told them what any decent man should realize—that such a gift was more horrible than any death—more horrible even than being used as the body and brain for such a gift to another.

Grisholm nodded. "Which, of course, is what will happen to you now, Mark. We'd be foolish not to use such a brain somehow—and when coupled with enough stability to stand up under all this without cracking more than you have, you become invaluable to us. Still not sorry you tried to kill us?"

He laughed at the answer, as if there were humor in the words. "Stubborn," he commented to the Custodian. "Well, if I'm to get any sleep before graduation listing, we've wasted enough time. Get on with it, Tom."

"It really isn't horrible, Mark," the Custodian said quietly. "If I could convince you of what it really is like, I'd try. But I guess there's no use arguing further."

His finger touched something on the table beside him, and there was a sudden whirr in the chair where Mark sat. Bands of metal had whipped around him painlessly, pinioning him to his seat. And a whirring over his head made him look up to see something the size of a wash-tub lowering, automatically centering a skull-shaped depression over his head. A similar affair was descending toward the Custodian.

"You!" He gasped with the realization.

The Custodian nodded. "Me, Mark. Because sixteen years from now, there must be a well-established successor to be appointed, just as Grisholm had me ready. It's logical—it takes the best brain we can find for the job. But if it's any consolation, it requires two whole years with this thing to make the fix permanent."

That was the final horror. Two years of regular sessions, while his mind slowly faded and another took its place! Two years of knowing what was coming, and being unable to stop it!

The dogs came over to stand beside him. They weren't needed. He wasn't going to fight physically. He'd have to fight mentally, to drive back into his own mind, to find the death-wish that had to be in every brain. Somehow, he had to will himself to death before the real loss of himself could be finished. It was all he could do now to defeat this monstrous recruiting scheme.

The larger dog licked his hand, whining something that sounded like words. Unconsciously, he reached out to pat its head, wondering if it were the dog Northrup had saved.

There was a soft chuckle in his mind, and words began to form in the silence around him. "I can read a little of your thought—there's some leakage," the Custodian's thoughts whispered along his nerves. "No, Mark. The story Northrup told you was simply part of the trap—because your Uncle Will in him still loves you and had faith you could pass any test. May I come in?"

And slowly, in spite of anything Mark could do, his mind entered Mark's. But there was no taking over. It was as if a corner of the brain expanded quietly, and another mind developed beside his own—a richer, surer mind, open to his. Tom Shaefer seemed to sigh in Mark's head, accepting what he found with no horror for any secret there. Then there was a feeling of another presence, somehow expanding out of the mind of Shaefer.

"Sidney Grisholm," Custodian Shaefer's mind said, and seemed to move aside while Grisholm came chuckling into existence, to introduce another. It went on and on, until the single brain of Mark Saxon was a community of twenty-two others beside himself, including the great orator whose mind had written all their speeches. And still there was no crowding of the personality that was wholly, permanently Mark's own.

"It can't be explained, Mark," one of the others seemed to say. "It has to be felt. And so far, there is no limit to what those incredible cells of the human brain can stand. Northrup is right, a thousand minds are not too much. But there is a price."

Then light hit his eyes again, and he was aware that the first hour was over, and that the helmets had been withdrawn.

Slowly, the minds inside his own began to fade away, leaving him almost alone, while his head seemed to split into a thousand shivering fragments.

He took the pain-killer Grisholm held out, muttering his thanks. There would be two years of violent headaches, he knew. And during those years, the new minds inside his own would grow stronger until they were permanent, as much a part of himself as his own.

Then there would be more years of headaches as he forced his brain to its limits to develop and master still more knowledge, to make himself worthy to take over the Custody.

They would never let him relax and coast on their abilities, but would drive him on, trying to make him just a little better than they had been.

"We're asking a lot of you," the Custodian said aloud, while a faint ghost of his mind seemed to echo it in Mark's brain. "Sometimes I wonder if we have the right to ask it of anyone. Maybe you'll think we're the monsters you felt before, Mark, for putting you through it. You still have the right to refuse, if you want."

He turned the words over, considering the price. It didn't matter—as it hadn't mattered to those other minds he had met. Man had always had duties and obligations, prices to pay, and misery to bear in the anguish of developing himself.

"Or the right to accept," Grisholm said. "But now you'd better get whatever rest you can. You'll have to be ready to take your Fellowship with the others in the morning, you know."

Fellowship! He tasted the word, nodding. The only real right lay there—the right men had dreamed of and striven for without any hope. It was the right to true Fellowship with the minds of others, the end to loneliness and fear. Immortality didn't matter, save for the time it could give in the fellowship of other minds, and the increasing community of such minds it could bring.

He stepped to the window for a last glimpse of Minerva facing and reaching for the dawn, and now the old inspiration was back. With the community of his mind linking together and building in warmth and understanding, he could dream again, as other such communities of mind must be dreaming. With their number increasing and their dreams deepening, time no longer mattered. Some day the dawn would come, and there would be men ready for it. It was a dawn he might see in some mind or other—see and share!

Rescue Team

"What on earth for?" President Moody is said to have asked when told that huge funds were needed to develop a robot. To which the Secretary of Space replied: "For nothing on Earth, ma'am!"

The story is probably apocryphal, since robots antedate her administration. Plans for a crude, self-guided machine to explore Mars date back to the legendary Sputnik age. But certainly space flight made the robot necessary. Men are designed for Earth's atmosphere, but robots can work in a vacuum or on alien planets where man can go only after a robot task force has prepared the way. The human cargo on the first stellar expeditions slept in frozen suspension, cared for by a robot crew until the new colony worlds were made safe for them. It is only natural that modern stellar colonies are ruled as often by robots as by men.

In fact, it was taken as axiomatic that no technical race could distrust these intelligent products of technology. Or so it was before our messages from the Roger MechNab Expedition.

MechNab's mission was to explore a star that had just turned red giant and to test our theories that such a star is one that has used up its hydrogen fuel—in switching to helium, it cools and expands to engulf the orbits of its planets. The expedition found proof of the theories—and much more.

Half a light-year from the ruined sun, a huge ship was located. We had finally met an alien race—one badly in need of rescue, since its ship was too primitive, however brave the effort.

Robots sped at once toward the ship to offer aid, while men prepared to follow on mobile platforms. But rather than being welcomed, the robots were immediately attacked by dozens of tiny ships. Men armed and rushed to help, but not before a number of robots were injured. Pederson's cover shows a rear-guard robot hurtling toward a human friend for assistance, as described by space phone.

Fortunately the aliens recognized men as protoplasmic fellow beings and a truce was arranged. Their initial hostility had been caused by their incredible psychopathic fear of mechanical life. We understand their ship is being towed to our system now, and it is hoped the aliens will soon lose their peculiar belief that anything not of flesh and blood is less than human.

No pictures of the aliens are available as yet. But it is reported that their form is rather beautiful—not unlike a terrestrial octopus.

Robots Should Be Seen

Old Pete moved along at a limping trot beside the robot that was pulling the rented rickshaw. Even in the feeble gravity of Mars, it was growing hard for Pete to maintain a decent speed, and the grease he had used liberally that morning couldn't keep his worn joints from creaking with every step. The tubing of his limbs was bent, his cables were frayed, and the plated cylinders of his torso and head were dented and dull. Pete had lasted longer than most, but after nearly forty years he was wearing out.

"Pete!" the voice of his master reached him. "Drop back and hold onto the backrail."

It was something he'd been longing to do, and now he obeyed gratefully. But it was no comfort to know that even Tom had noticed his staggering gait. He widened his vision to study the man for signs of impatience, but Tom had apparently already forgotten him.

Tom Henley was glowering at his wristwatch, worry on his usually good-natured face. There were signs of hasty shaving, and his dark hair was tangled from running his hand through it. Now he mussed it up further as he looked up at the petite, pert blonde beside him.

"Darn it, Cynthia, did you have to take forever fixing your hair?" he grumbled. "If we miss the Earth flight…"

Her usually cooing voice had an edge in it. "I can't look like a frump, can I? Even if we're going to get married on the ship, instead of the decent June wedding we planned! No gown, no shower, nothing I want. And for what? Not even a good industrial job! Just some old college where you can be an assistant professor, with practically no notice. And now you want me to look like a tramp…Oh, Tom, let's not start anything again! I'm going, aren't I?"

Tom sighed, glanced at his watch, and surrendered. "I know I'm asking a lot, Cyn, but . . ."

Pete trotted on, his mind turning back to his own miseries. Tom was going back to Earth where new robots sold for less than the freight needed to send Pete back. After being Tom's personal robot during the man's whole life, he'd be abandoned for the local government to pick up and dispose of as it chose.

Robot, his mind pounded at him. *Machine. Practically an antique. Good construction, though, lasted a long time. They don't build them like me nowadays. Saw one go out of order last year and the police had to chop him to bits before they could stop him. Good thing they don't have feelings, eh? Well, this one's had it. Scrap him!*

Everyone agreed that robots had no feelings, even when they were being dismembered piece by piece. Well, maybe other robots didn't have; maybe he was the only freak cursed with a mind that could suffer, and all the others might be the mechanical gadgets they were supposed to be. His rigid conditioning circuits kept him from such nonsense as speaking to other robots, except when ordered to. Once, long ago, he'd tried to break the conditioning, to make his feelings known, as a pet might whimper for attention. Now after their treatment of his "insanity," he knew better.

They passed through the entrance to the rocket field and he heard Tom sigh in relief at the sight of the big ship still loading. Then they were before the main entrance and Pete began lifting the heavy burden of Cynthia's luggage from the back of the rickshaw and carrying it toward the weighing-in section, staggering under the load as his gyros fought for balance. He started back for the rest, just as Tom scooped it up and followed him.

"Tom!" Cynthia's shocked voice was like the crack of a whip. "If you need exercise, there are salons for that! Don't make a spectacle of yourself!"

Tom's face slowly reddened, then his jaw clamped down stubbornly. While the checker stared, he deliberately bent down and lifted two of the pieces onto the scale before Pete could reach them. "Stay back, Pete!" he ordered.

There was nothing Pete could do but obey. And he realized that even his conditioning circuits must be wearing out, since there was no shock in him. It wasn't the first time; even Anne Miller, the young lawyer down the hall who sometimes invited Tom to dinner, had taken to doing things that should have been his duty. And he'd let himself adjust to it, until it took Cynthia's shocked reaction to remind him of his duty!

The weighing in went slowly, not helped by Tom's mood, Cynthia's white-faced silence, or the checker's open contempt. Their was an argument about a pocket knife with a blade slightly too long to pass without duty; there was a worse one when the checker decided that Tom's notebooks, covered with the mathematics of cellular memory-storage, might be subversive code. It wasn't helped when Tom demanded the chief inspector and found his checker was the chief. But eventually the baggage was cleared and marked.

"All right, Pete," Tom said. "Climb on. You're the last."

Cynthia's mouth opened, closed, and opened again. "You're not taking him, surely! He's all worn out."

"They've got shops on Earth that can rebuild him."

"But he's such a relic! What will people think? Oh, I didn't mind too much here, but on Earth—!"

"I grew up with him, and it's none of people's business. Get on the scales, Pete, and try to hold still!"

Pete was already clambering on, his mind whirling with the shock of sudden hope until only his conditioning made him obey. A new body, good for another forty years! And he'd been thinking…

The checker shook his head, cutting off the argument. "You're already at full weight allowance, and run you over if you didn't have another scrap. No dice, Mac!"

"I'll pay extra, naturally," Tom told him. "I'm not asking favors from your company!"

"Still no dice. We've got full cargo holds of priority drugs for Earth. Get him off my scale. I'm closing up!"

For a second, Tom seemed to be counting. Then he caught his breath, glancing at the clock. "All right, damn it. I'll pay for a passenger ticket on him."

The checker was finally apparently enjoying himself. "Nope. Against regulations. Can't sell tickets except to 'sentient, conscious beings.' Look it up if you don't believe that's the law, Mac." He grinned happily. "And don't think you can go over my head. Happens the port superintendent's my brother-in-law. You want to store him until we have space, pay dissembly and reassembly, and maybe we'll take him. But I'll bet he won't last through it, the way he looks."

He held out a book of regulations, stabbing at a passage with one heavy finger…

Tom was just coming out of the superintendent's office a few minutes later, shaking his head, when the siren hooted out the blast-off signal and the big ship began to blast, heading for Earth without them. Cynthia had already signaled a cruising rickshaw and gone off stiffly. Tom looked, seemed to waver, and then turned back to Pete.

"Get my junk back to the apartment and tell the landlady I'll need it again," he ordered. "Then find Anne Miller and tell her to meet me at the Federal Building as soon as she can, Pete. If these bastards think they can hold me up for that dissembly-assembly racket, they'd better think again!"

Pete watched him head toward the lone motor-cab at the stand and turned clumsily to obey, guided only by the conditioning circuits. There had only been a few times in the past when he'd seen Tom like this, but his memory of the occasions left him stewing frantically in his own impotence.

He felt no better that night when they all returned to his apartment. To Pete's surprise, Cynthia came with Tom and Anne, though she was oddly quiet and reserved. She'd been jealous of Anne once, but it no longer seemed to bother her. Pete fumbled in his mind for a key to her making up with Tom so soon. But he had too little experience with human females to be sure of anything, and he'd long since learned that what he read in books when no one was watching him bore little relation to reality. People refused to fit into the patterns given them by the novelists.

He clumped about awkwardly, making coffee for them and listening, trying to learn what had happened. But it came out slowly. Anne was doing most of the talking, and she seemed no happier than Pete was. She was a quietly attractive girl, tall and dark in contrast to Cynthia, and now her low voice seemed tired and uncertain.

"If you'd only waited, Tom," she said for the twentieth time. "I'd have been able to make something of the fact that Pete's an Earth-built robot, and that you're still technically registered as an Earth citizen, since you were ten when you came here. Mars laws don't apply. But no—first you try to get an injunction, as if this were Earth where they hand those out without a full hearing sometimes. And then you finally use your Earth citizenship to bring private suit on those grounds! Well, at least you didn't demand a full panel of six jurors."

"What difference would that make?" he asked.

"This is Mars, Tom: They pick jurors here by lot, with no challenges except for subnormal intelligence or prior knowledge of the parties involved." She sighed. "Can you guess what six average robot-owning citizens would think of a suit to prove that a robot was a sentient, conscious being who could be damaged by refusal to grant passage? You're just lucky that Judge Samuel is old fashioned enough not to use robots."

She sighed again, picking up the cup Pete had poured for her. "Thanks, Pete," she said. "You look tired. Better sit down."

She watched the shocked looks on the other faces that mirrored the shock Pete felt, and then grinned wryly. "Wipe it off, Tom. You've claimed Pete is sentient; you'd better act as if you meant it. From now on, I not only want that document of manumission, but I want you to treat him exactly as you would your best human friend. Because if you put in a claim here that you yourself know to be false—or treat as false—it's *criminal* fraud. And make sure you get a record of the wages you pay him, too. We have laws against slavery, written when they tried to bring in those Ionians for labor. Why'd you do it, Tom? Why?"

"Damn it, Pete responds to his senses. And he's aware of surroundings. That makes him sentient and conscious, doesn't it?" Tom glanced at the robot, then nodded wearily. "All right, Pete, sit down. And from now on, sit down or lie down whenever you can. And..."

Apparently he could think of nothing else. Pete sank down slowly, his conditioning screaming at the cross-orders of propriety and command. It was a good thing he did, though; something seemed to have gone wrong with his balance senses as he tried to digest what was going on.

"Earth definitions," Anne said bitterly, putting her cup down. "We're an outworld here, where humanity is more valued than at the home world; we have our own meanings, and our own dictionary. Here, sentient means capable of feeling, or having emotion; and conscious means being aware of self, as distinct from mere action-response. And, incidentally, I might as well warn you that in suing as an agent for Pete, you're fully responsible for proof. And the burden of proof here rests entirely on the claimant, not on the defendant. Well, I'll try to get it *in camera*, instead of before a formal panel of three judges. If Planetary TerraMars will go along. At least that way, only a digest of what happens will reach the papers, probably. Anyhow, usually the judge feels flattered when you ask for him to have full authority and drop the formal piffle. Samuel likes it that way, I hear."

"I could drop the suit," Tom suggested. He looked thoroughly chastened.

She nodded. "You could. That means you pay full costs of everything, including inconvenience to the defendant—and by now, they're probably flying in a bunch of experts. Mars doesn't *like* lawsuits, unless they're necessary; that's one of the reasons we manage to keep open dockets here and you're up day after tomorrow. No, you'd better figure out how you'll defend your claim."

Cynthia sniffed. Tom ran his finger around the loose collar he wore. Then abruptly he stiffened. "All right, damn it. I wasn't just going off half-cocked, Anne. I told you six months ago I had mathematical evidence that no intelligence with any degree of free association and more than a certain number of memory storage units could fail to have some consciousness of self and emotional response. I was thinking of those fossil Martians; their gene pattern indicates brains complex enough. But I also thought it just might apply to robots. I've been watching Pete since then, and I think it does."

This time, Cynthia's sniff was louder, but Pete barely heard it. If Tom meant it…and it would explain his helping with robot work…and his almost affectionate desire to keep Pete with him, even on Earth…He tried to lean forward, to declare himself. But the conditioning had been warped enough in letting him sit among them. He remained rigid and silent.

"I've been studying him, too," Anne said. "I think he may have more than you indicated—enough to pass the minimum legal requirements, since they operate on the basis of giving the benefit of doubt to any sentient race or being. But the burden of proof is on you. Prove it."

"My math…" he suggested.

She laughed. "Judge Samuel knows law, but he'd probably flunk out on elementary gravity tensors. Still, maybe we can dig up something from them, if you'll help me with your notes."

"Not tonight, Miss Miller," Cynthia cut in. "Tom's still got some apologizing to me to do. He was actually brutal. I've never been so humiliated. And—"

Anne laughed, and it wasn't a pretty sound. Then she stood up, and reached for Tom's notebooks. "All right, Pete, come along. You've had a math background, and Tom used you for secretarial work. Come along. As a sentient being, it's time you were compromised, anyhow. Okay?"

"Yes, Miss Miller," he answered. He saw her frown slightly and realized it was the wrong answer. It should have been *Okay, Anne*; but—but damn it, there were limits! He looked for permission toward Tom. The man looked vaguely embarrassed, and Cynthia was wearing her sly look. But that was their business.

Hours later, when he finally was sent back by Anne after she'd drained what she could from him by direct questions, he saw Cynthia leaving Tom's apartment. She was smiling faintly, but there was something he didn't like about it. He went to the master's room, only reassured when he saw that Tom was asleep, also smiling. Then he saw the slip of paper on the table. It was a spacegram, with a brief penciled note indicating Cynthia had received it after Tom was asleep. Pete stared at the message bitterly.

APPOINTMENT AS ASSISTANT PROFESSOR CANCELLED STOP DIRECTORS FEEL FACETIOUS SUIT OBVIOUS

PUBLICITY DEVICE UNSUITABLE ACADEMIC REPUTATION DEMANDED ALL STAFF MEMBERS STOP

It was signed by the Dean of the college that had chosen Tom. Planetary TerraMars had its own quiet way of striking back; Pete's store of miscellaneous knowledge supplied the fact that the president of TerraMars was one of the college directors. And Cynthia'd seen it. Pete mulled it over sickly.

Pete had seen movies of trials on Earth, though Mars had consistently refused to install television except for educational purposes, so he had no idea of what Martian trials might be like. In any event, the trial here bore little relation to what he'd expected. The courtroom was a place big enough to seat some thirty spectators, now empty; and a small raised platform supported a bench, a tape recorder for sight and sound, and a small table toward the front. It was entirely unimpressive. But the trial would be held there, though he'd thought that *in camera* meant in the Judge's chambers. On Mars, apparently, it simply meant without formality. There was no bailiff, no clerk, and no battery of reporters permitted inside, though a few men stood out in the hall. Pete was seated in a rear corner.

Samuel smiled as the legal representatives of Planetary TerraMars took one side of the table, leaving the other for Anne and Tom. The insolent checker from the rocket field sat in a corner opposite that of Pete. Samuel began in a silky voice as the door was closed, outlining everything as if it were some pleasant bit of gossip. Then he nodded his head as another elderly man came from a side door.

"In a case involving certain technologies beyond the field of the Court's knowledge, it is customary to ask for a technical assistant and advisor to the Court," he beamed at them. "I consider us very fortunate in having had Dr. Nchungu Paulssen volunteer his services, since we are all aware that Dr. Paulssen is the greatest cyberneticist Earth has produced. The Court appreciates the fact that Dr. Paulssen has given up a part of his vacation to serve here. Are there any objections from either party?"

The beam remained, but the old face of the judge was suddenly sharp, as if ready to shoot bolts of lightning at anyone objecting.

There was other preliminary business at some length as lawyers and Judge conferred, but most of it could not be heard by Pete. The corner seemed to blur all voices except those coming from the bench or directly in front of it. He saw Samuel writing busily on an old yellow scratch pad, though the recorder was delivering a constant précis of all that went on.

Then finally, things began to move, with a certainty that bore no relation to the involved business of cross, redirect, recross, and re-redirect examination Pete had expected from the movies. The checker was called and told his story. Tom told his. Cynthia was called from some place back in the room—Pete hadn't seen her come in, though his ears would once have detected anything and led his eyes to her at once.

There was nothing overtly wrong with her testimony, though it seemed to please the counsel for TerraMars, Mr. Arkwright, more than it pleased Anne. And then, finally, Pete heard his own name.

He limped up, while the Judge again conferred with the attorneys. Finally, Samuel nodded. "There will be no swearing. I understand that the claimant officially designated as PT-17476 is inherently truthful, and will accept that on advice of Dr. Paulssen. Mr. Henley, are you prepared to do as you have agreed?"

Tom nodded and stood up, while the recorder turned to him at once. He faced Pete, his expression showing some strain. "Pete—or PT-17476—I want to give you some instructions." He underscored the word faintly, while the Judge stared at him with a faint amusement around the old eyes. "You are to tell the exact truth, to anyone who asks it within this room. If I have ever given you any instruction or order to the contrary, or if I should give you such an order during these proceedings, you are to ignore it—any such instruction, that is."

He sat down, while Samuel turned to Paulssen. The big, dark-skinned man with the startlingly red hair nodded briefly.

Anne covered only what had been rehearsed—his relations with Tom, his manumission, which he admitted to; it was a sickening thing to find that Tom no longer wanted him, except on a basis of casual "employment," but he had accepted it, since he could do nothing else. And his memory of the incident at the rocket field. She hesitated, then abruptly sat down, while Arkwright strolled over.

"Pete, you know you're a robot, don't you?" he began. "That you have that knowledge built into your memory banks?"

"Objection," Anne said quietly.

"Sustained," Samuel announced. "The matter of the definition of the status of the claimant is the subject of this investigation, not of assumption. Mr. Arkwright, you don't have a jury to impress. And I don't intend to be here all week. Get on with it."

Arkwright apologized smoothly, looking a little surprised. He asked a series of meaningless questions, so far as Pete could tell Then he paused. "Pete, do you like me?"

"No, sir."

"Do you dislike me?"

"No, sir."

"Would you dislike me if I were to take a hammer and smash you to small pieces?"

Pete tried to answer, but there was no direct answer possible. How could he say without knowing the reasons for the action? If Arkwright were ordered to do so, there would be no reason to dislike the man for carrying out orders from someone else, certainly. Besides, he wasn't sure but what it might be a good thing for everyone, including himself. He'd already ruined Tom's chance at the Earth job, and his time was growing steadily shorter.

"Answer, the question!" Samuel said firmly.

Inside himself, Pete squirmed, but there was more weight on one side than the other. "No, sir."

"Do you dislike anyone in this room, Pete?" Arkwright asked smugly. He was beaming happily.

"Yes, sir." Pete's answer twisted the smile off Arkwright's face and brought a faint sound from Tom's mouth.

But the lawyer recovered smoothly. "I see. Whom do you dislike?"

And there was no answer to that. Cynthia sat there, but a robot could not offend. He heard the Judge demand that he answer, he heard the question repeated. And still he sat silently.

Finally, Arkwright smiled, and brushed it all aside, just as a wave of blackness seemed about to sweep over Pete's mind. "No matter, that is the least of the two factors. Let's pass over that, Pete. Tell me instead, do you have a direct awareness of yourself as a distinct personality? Do you consider yourself an ego, or know the meaning of the terms?"

"Yes, sir." Pete told him. "All those, yes."

And this time, it was Anne and Tom who beamed. They had done everything except ask him that direct question, much as he had wanted to answer it. Now it was out. Yet Arkwright seemed completely undisturbed.

"Your Honor," he said, "I have brought this up only to dispose of it. I was certain that PT-17476 would answer in the affirmative. Perhaps Dr. Paulssen would explain this?"

At Samuel's question, Paulssen nodded. His voice was high-pitched and his words had the flatness of too familiar material. "All cybernetic devices intended for direct response to voice commands would naturally answer yes to such questions," he said. "Purchasers have shown a tendency to favor devices which use the first-person pronoun in referring to themselves, rather than the third-person. And to make such a response possible, it is necessary to implant a crude concept of ego into the memory banks, as a referent to the symbol I. This, of course, need not have any direct correlation with the sense of ego which the human mind appears to assume."

"And would it be possible to educate a robot to an ability to describe human emotions accurately, and to use such terms in referring to influences affecting him?" Arkwright asked, reeling it off as if quoting.

Paulssen smiled faintly. "You've had some very good sources of information," he said. "Yes, definitely. A robot will naturally be able to memorize anything that can be defined, and hence can give a quite accurate description of an emotional state. Also, of course, one will use the closest possible symbol to a referent, however abstract; and in many cases, since we have no specific symbol in the general language for the conditioned reactions of a mechanical mind, it would almost be necessary for a robot to use words that apply to human emotions."

"Thank you, Dr. Paulssen." Arkwright bent to his briefcase and extracted a piece of paper. "I have here the certificate of sale of PT-17476 from the original owner to the father of Mr. Henley. As the Court will see, this is a record which states that the original owner was a practicing psychologist, and that the robot was used as a recorder and summarizer, among other duties. Also, that shortly before being sold to Mr. Roderick Henley, the robot went into a confused state, indicating the conditioning circuit was not operating properly. A new conditioning circuit was installed, but no change was made in the memory cells! I'd like this marked Exhibit A."

Anne came to the bench at once, and another conference began, but Pete wasn't listening. He was remembering again the horrible period when he'd finally broken through his conditioning—and the worse period of slow creeping back to a personality of his own, complete with a full memory of his purely automatic state after the installation of the new conditioner.

Then his eyes caught sight of Tom marching steadily toward Cynthia, hurt shock on the man's face. She was smiling like a cat watching a mouse dying under its paws. Very deliberately, she dropped her engagement ring on the floor, kicked it toward Tom, and turned her back to move toward the farthest corner.

The paper Arkwright had produced could only have come from Tom's packed briefcase on the night she'd stayed alone after he slept. Cynthia had made her choice in her own way—whether because she'd been driven by anger or by the fact that he'd be blacklisted from all future jobs, Pete couldn't guess. First Tom's future work, then his plans for marriage…

Judge Samuel's voice brought him around before he could see more. "PT-17476, is this record correct?"

"Yes, sir."

"All right, then, it's so marked," Samuel said. His face was still smiling, but his voice sounded grim. "So it seems, according to what I can learn, that no question concerning the sentience or consciousness of PT-17476 directed to him can have any meaningful answer, and we will discontinue this line of questioning. Objections?"

He waited, briefly. Then he nodded. "Dr. Paulssen has suggested that he is willing to make a personal investigation within his ability to discover any evidence of sentience in the case of PT-17476. Unless there is an objection, I shall direct that PT-17476 go with him to Room 33-B for such an examination." He waited, then nodded happily. "So directed. Court is adjourned until tomorrow at ten o'clock!"

Samuel was shucking off his robe as he headed for his private quarters, drawing out a thin copy of the handicapping sheet on the local dog races. Paulssen tapped Pete on the shoulder and approached Anne and Tom.

Anne was muttering something about trying to get an alternate definition through on some legal device, but she stopped as Paulssen drew up. He shook hands with them, his voice blurred in the echoes of the nearly empty room. But Pete could see Tom nod, and draw out a copy of his mathematical notes and pass them to the cyberneticist. "Stay with Dr. Paulssen until he's finished, Pete," Tom said. "Then we'll be up at my apartment."

He looked sick and beaten. But Pete could say nothing in sympathy. He followed Paulssen out meekly, turning down the hall to the room that had been assigned.

Paulssen dropped behind a desk and shook his head. "Pete," he said quietly, "if you have any consciousness of yourself, I'm sorry for you. I hope you don't. But whether you do or not, you can surely integrate the difficulty I face. If I were to try to prove I was sentient and conscious in the local meaning, could I do so?"

"No, sir," Pete said evenly. He'd already thought of that. No man had ever proved conclusively that he existed, except by the axiomatic assumption of *cogito, ergo sum*, which was itself improvable. And it was seemingly no easier to prove the existence of a personal ego. *Cogito, ego sum* was assumed in the case of humans; everyone knew that men thought and had awareness of self; nobody had to prove it. No technique for such proof had ever been required.

But Paulssen tried. Pete could understand very little of what the man asked and did; some of it had a vague relation to what his first owner had used on patients suffering from neuroses, some resembled the tests made when he was turned in for repair. But the pattern of the whole escaped him. It would probably have been beyond the skill and understanding of the men who had designed Pete. He'd heard that the man was a genius from casual mentions made by Tom. He could believe it. But if so, he was an uncertain genius at the moment.

Finally he finished. He shook his head. "That's all, Pete. You can go."

Pete wanted to ask for the results, but his legs lifted him up and his vocal apparatus remained quiet as he moved to the hall. He had a last look at Paulssen spreading Tom's figures out and bending toward them, before he closed the door behind him.

Then a harsh voice spoke near his ear.

"PT-17476, under the laws of the state, and in agreement with the first tenet of Conditioning, which supersedes all others, and according to Code ADEX-17, you are hereby possessed for examination by the Supreme Government of the Free Planet of Mars."

The scrapheap, Pete realized. He'd known it could happen since Tom had signed the document of manumission. He was without an owner legally, and the state had the right to pick him up. They'd wasted no time after learning of it.

And in his condition, he couldn't pass even an elementary test of reliability. He saw Paulssen opening the door, but there was nothing the man could do. Pete moved after the pickup squad.

It was all over in the morning. He sat propped in one corner where he'd been directed, waiting in line with half a dozen other robots that had been condemned. And his judgment of his condition had been correct. The technician in charge had made only cursory tests before pronouncing him to be no longer safe for operation and beyond salvage. "Dismantle," he had said quietly, and signed the paper. There hadn't even been a comment on the fact that he'd served long and well. He watched a new robot wheel up a truck and carry off two of those ahead of him. He'd be in the next load.

Then there was a sudden muttering from the office outside, and another voice that carried over—the familiar voice of Anne Miller, raised louder than he'd heard it before.

For a second, a faint vestige of ridiculous hope brightened in him, but he knew it was useless. He saw the door open, and saw her come in.

"All right, Peter," she said. Her face looked as if she hadn't slept, but there was a softness to her voice now. "I'd have gotten here sooner, but this takes more red tape cutting than you'd think. Come on."

He lay there, not moving, though he wanted to obey. But the conditioning had accepted his state possession.

She swore briefly, and turned to a man beside her. "Free him," she said sharply.

"PT-17476, by Code ADEX-17, the state relinquishes you," the man said reluctantly. Then he swung to Anne. "All the same, I never heard of a *habeas corpus* for a robot. It doesn't make sense."

She smiled back wearily. "Without it, Judge Samuel would have been subject to trouble for defaulting on judgment of a case—and that isn't good. Come on, Pete, Tom wants to see you." She led him out through the robot testing building, and onto the street, where a rickshaw was waiting. He started to fall behind, but she motioned him up beside her. Against the protests of his conditioning, he had to obey the order. There was a mutter from a small crowd around, but a grim-faced squad of police swung around them and they headed toward the Federal Building.

"I'm sorry about this," she said. She was at least taking her own advice to treat him like a person. "Paulssen reported it, but I had a hard time locating Samuel. He hated to give me the writ, too—he's partly prejudging the case in granting you that much human status, and maybe I can make something of it. Maybe not. Mostly, I guess it depends on what Paulssen has to say. Damn, damn, damn! If Tom weren't such a fool—"

Court was just opening when they arrived, and it did open the moment Anne had seated herself. There were more reporters out in the hall this time—and one of them was obviously the head of Triplanet on Mars. But inside the room, there was only the same group, this time without Cynthia.

Pete followed Anne, until he was sitting behind Tom. And then his mind lurched. Tom's face was bruised and swollen, and one of his arms was in a sling.

"Tell him," Anne whispered. "Remember, Pete's supposedly sentient!"

Tom seemed to jerk out of a gloomy daydream, and turned, trying to grin through battered lips. "I went for a little walk after dinner, Pete," he said. "I got to the park, and about a dozen hoodlums spotted me. I guess they don't like the idea that I'm trying to free all robots. They said so, anyhow—pretty vigorously. If Anne hadn't come along with a policeman…"

Samuel glared at them, and Tom shut up. But Pete had gotten the picture. All Mars would hate Tom for even trying to claim that a robot had human attributes; Mars depended too heavily on robot labor to risk any loss of her control over the mechanical beings. It made a picture that darkened every second as Pete considered it. It would include Anne, too, though he had no clear idea of what could be done to a woman. And probably if by some miracle they should win the case, even Samuel and Paulssen would be subject to the wrath of Mars.

But now Paulssen was beginning to tell what he had learned, and there was no further muttering.

The man seemed as weary as Tom and Anne. He shook his head. "I have examined PT-17476 to the best of my ability," he reported needlessly. "And I have also tried to follow Dr. Henley's demonstration that at certain levels of complexity and free choice, any memory complex must become capable of self-awareness and self-invoked emotional type reactions. Frankly, I find the theory extremely interesting, and of considerable promise; in fact it agrees with some tentative work I have been undertaking myself. But it is only a theory, and must lack any form of adequate proof for years, if it ever can be proved.

"As to PT-17476, I have found a number of significant deviations from the pattern that should exist in view of his original responses, even allowing for the substitution of a new conditioning circuit. Significant, but not conclusive, I must add, in my opinion. But for the information of the court—"

Slowly, Pete's legs straightened under him. He saw the gazes of the others directed to the bench, including that of Samuel. Paulssen was bent over his notes, not looking up.

Pete blanked the words from his mind, sure now what they must be. There was no way of proving whether he was sentient or not, any more than he could ever hope to know whether any other robot in all existence had developed a personality of his own. Within himself, Pete knew. But even if he were to stand up and protest his free will as loudly as any man, all that could be hoped was that men would decide he'd finally worn out for sure and that he was completely out of control, mouthing phrases out of his education.

All he could do now was to cause more anguish to the humans he knew best. Anne and Tom were in enough trouble. Tom had lost his job, his fiancée, and now his chance of getting along with other men; with the verdict, whatever money he had would be stripped from him, apparently. And beyond that—Pete couldn't force his thoughts further.

He moved out as quietly as his limbs would permit, to the door and through it. Vaguely he was aware that he was moving without direction from another—against an implied order that he remain. But now finally the conditioning didn't seem to matter. It had suffered an overload of some kind, and it was quiet within him.

He moved steadily toward 33-B. There was no one inside, and he shut the door, looking for the letter opener that had been there. It was still there.

He should have been scrapped long before. He was useless to himself, or worse than useless. He'd ruined everything he touched. There was nothing he could do now to help. But one final thing was possible.

He reached for the letter opener and began forcing the nuts on his chest plates off. They came slowly from the bent plates, resisting his grip and the small leverage of the instrument. But they came, and he could look inside himself, see the complexity of his brain and the small glow of the tiny plasma jet that gave him power. That must not be injured; he had no wish to cause further harm.

But by the manumission document, he was his own—and so was his brain. It was his to do with as he liked—or to destroy.

He took careful aim for the critical circuits, raised the letter opener, and began bringing it down!

Something jolted against his arm, throwing it aside. A heavy body hit his legs, toppling him. And then he saw a police robot bending over him, lifting him. He screamed, demanding his rights. But the man who had struck him shook his head.

"I got orders to see nothing happened to you—and nobody cancelled them. Bring him along, Zebee."

Paulssen was winding up as they entered the court room, but he cut off at the sight of them.

Samuel started to castigate the policeman, then hesitated. The beaming smile wiped completely from his face. "Well, officer?" he snapped.

"I got orders to protect this robot, Your Honor," the policeman said stubbornly. "So when I found him killing himself—and by jinx, it wasn't anything else—I brought him back. What'll I do now?"

For a second, nobody had an answer. Pete pulled himself slowly from the arms of the doubtful robot, giving up even the final hope. "I'll be quiet," he said.

But Anne was on her feet, almost screaming. "Your Honor! Your Honor, I wish to place PT-17476 on the witness stand!"

He sat through it, patiently answering when some order was restored. Yes, he'd meant to end his existence. Why not? It was common logic. When existence offered more than enough misery to all and no advantages to himself, the solution was to end it.

She dragged it out of him, amid objections that were mostly denied, piece by piece. Perhaps he could have told it without prompting now, but he had no desire to. Why should the final shame of Tom for his property be made public. But at last the final examination and cross examination was done, and Samuel sat considering it bitterly, his face suddenly haggard.

Paulssen sighed. "With your Honor's permission, I'll amend my report. Upon further evidence, I can say without doubt that PT-17476 is a fully sentient, conscious being. Without full consciousness of self, it is completely impossible to assume any need to end that self. And no outside order can overcome the basic conditioning against self destruction that is implanted in all robots. Nor can any but a fully reasoning being explain logically the illogic of a final decision that nothing remains for which to live. That is a purely emotional response—without emotions there is no burden to escape, and no need to attempt self-destruction. That should be at least as self-evident as the fact we exist."

Arkwright was up, but Samuel seemed to be staring into a dark hole in space just ahead of him. Then the Judge sighed softly, and for a moment some of his smile crept back, without disturbing the harsh lines that were etched into his face.

"Sit down, Mr. Arkwright," he said quietly. "This is a court of Justice, sitting in camera under the customs here in force, and acting under the authority of the Free Planet of Mars. Both parties having agreed to abide by any verdict I may reach, without recourse to appeal, I am empowered to decide upon what I consider conclusive evidence. I find it conclusive now.

"Therefore, I find PT-17476 as an individual to be sentient and conscious within the meaning and requirement of the law. In consequence of injuries sustained by him by denial of his rights of passage, I order the Planetary TerraMars Corporation to assume all costs of these proceedings, to pay to his counsel, Miss Anne Miller, an amount equal to the cost of providing counsel for the corporation, and to reimburse him for injuries in the amount of five thousand dollars. I further order the Planetary TerraMars Corporation to provide a ship this day to convey him and any other party or parties of his choice to Earth in safety and comfort equal to the best obtainable, and to provide a safe escort from this room to the point of embarkation."

He turned to the policeman. "Officer, you'll guard these people until TerraMars can provide safe-escort. Court dismissed!"

Pete sat still, staring at the place where the impossible had happened. But it hadn't taken care of everything. "But I still don't belong to anyone," he protested slowly.

Paulssen smiled as he moved back to join them, while a red-faced Arkwright began calling his client to arrange for the carrying out of the court order. Pete could see Anne and Tom looking at each other unbelievingly, clinging to each other in the forgotten grip with which they'd heard the verdict. And by the door, waiting while the policeman went for more troops, the huge police robot stood clapping his hands together slowly, though his face remained impassive. The reporters would be gone by now—but there would be time enough for escape before the news was spread.

Paulssen chuckled suddenly. "Pete," he said, "I wouldn't worry about your manumission; Earth won't recognize it anyway—at least for a while. And I don't think Dr, Henley has any desire to kick you out."

Tom shook his head. "More likely the other way, Dr. Paulssen. What the deuce am I going to do on Earth?"

"Pool your work with mine to learn more about how the ego is formed—and work till you curse the day you met me," Paulssen said.

"And when that's done, maybe we'll find something else to work on. I do my own hiring; no directors cancel any contract I sign. As for Miss Miller—" He chuckled again, and motioned to Pete. "Pete, you're embarrassing these two, now that you're a person. Let's go for a walk out of their way, shall we?"

Pete stared at the two, only vaguely aware that his limp seemed to have grown less and that his gyros were balancing him steadily again. He moved past Anne, and then stopped, leaning down toward her.

"Kiss him, you fool," he said.

It came out flat-voiced, even a little mechanical, but she got the idea. So, obviously, did Tom.

Fade-Out

Jack Kirbey came up the last rickety flight of steps and kicked open the door to his dingy room. The small man sitting on the bed arose and nodded gravely.

"I am to take it that fortune failed to smile on you, not so?" he asked softly. Tse-Shan, in spite of his American life and schooling, still retained the gentle politeness of the high levels of Tibet.

Jack grunted sourly. "You take it right, 'Shan. The old codger practically threw me out of the office."

"Ah, so unfortunate. Precisely what happened, young friend?"

"They let me in promptly enough, and Burroughs acted pleased to see me at first. But when I told him about this old age rejuvenator, he lost interest in a hurry. Said it was too fantastic, and the public wouldn't buy it. He was willing to try it out, if I'd *lend* him the formula, but he couldn't see the $5,000 I was asking until it was tested. He liked the royalty idea even less."

"I suppose you were given to reminding him that you had received a mere pittance of one thousand dollars for the former hair restorer?"

"I told him he's pigged down enough dough from that to afford a little risk on this. Money-grubbing hog! He practically swindled us out of that last thing, and he'd like to do it again. I told him so, before he got rid of me."

Tse-Shan smiled leisurely. "I observed that you were not unaccompanied on your return. I may assume, I believe, that Mr. Burroughs sent the gentlemen who followed you in the hope of learning your address, and perhaps resorting to low cunning to secure the rejuvenator."

"Sure he did. He'd steal this little bottle pronto if he could. We'd better get rid of all we've made up and conceal the formula, in case they ransack the room."

Tse-Shan nodded agreement and began dumping the few bottles that had been prepared down the drain of the tiny sink. "The landlady was interested in the rent," he observed. "She made serious suggestions that payment might not be unwelcome. Perhaps we should take this and another remedy to a different company."

They made their living, such as it was, by preparing the ancient Tibetan medicines in a somewhat more palatable form, and marketing them to the various patent medicine companies that sold such items. Tse-Shan, of course, supplied the Tibetan information; Jack applied a limited chemical education to the task of removing the dragon's skin and powdered rat's blood from the remedies and substituting cheaper and more effective ingredients.

"Landladies," 'Shan continued, "are habitually mercenary. Would it not be advisable to secure some remuneration for our work in the near future?"

"It would, 'Shan, and we're going to. I've dug up an idea. You know that formula you told me about—the one you claimed the lamas used to become invisible?"

"Yes. But I did not use the word 'invisibility'." The yellow face crinkled up in a mild frown. "It is not the transparency of the flesh they desire, young friend."

Jack nodded absently. "Sure, I know. You claimed they used it to move about among their fellows accomplishing miracles, apparently because they were unseen. It does make it more possible, doesn't it?"

"Of a certainty. But there are certain precautions that must be taken. One must keep in the dark, or to the light of the moon, during its use, since the light of day, when not shielded from the inner spirit, weakens it greatly, most greatly, and loosens the binding that unites soul and body. It would not be seemly that we should permit the laymen to use such an exotic compound, or much even might occur."

"Umm. Maybe you're right. Going down to the library again to study up on your Oriental mysticism?"

"Of a surety." Tse-Shan was already drawing on his coat. "Perhaps there I shall conceive of some means of turning that mysticism into a substance as material as bank-notes."

Jack watched him leave the room, and a little smile hovered over the American's face. Tse-Shan was not one to object to filthy lucre, but his mind was entirely too cluttered up with the beliefs of his race. He ascribed magical properties to half the concoctions they had made up.

"Dragon-blood and newt's tongue," Jack began, running over the invisibility formula in his mind. "Don't need them, but those herbs might contain something that would do the trick. Let's see. Uh-huh; got 'em all."

The liquid, when it was finished, was a mottled greenish-yellow. Jack looked at it doubtfully, but his mind was made up. If it did work, he wasn't going to worry about its looks. In a frenzy of haste, he began stripping off his clothes, then he reached for the bottle and swallowed, muttering the incantation that went with it; of course, he wasn't superstitious, but there was no harm in making sure.

Hell-fire gnawed at his stomach, seeped up through his veins, and invaded his mind. The light that streamed through the window and struck his eyes was a raging inferno, and he tottered weakly to the wall and yanked down the shade. Then his anguished muscles carried him to the bed, and he dropped down limply, agony twitching him about sporadically. Compared to this, strychnine was a gentle stimulant.

When consciousness returned, the pain had passed, leaving him weak; he lay quietly for a few seconds, summoning his vanished energy. The first attempt at movement sent agony racing through him again, but he could not lie there forever; with a convulsive heave, he threw himself from the bed and set his feet on the floor. He'd have to test the thing now.

Strangely sluggish, he moved to the window and pulled at the blind, tugging aand straining until it finally snapped up. The light streamed against him, hot and unpleasant, but without the acute misery it had caused before. He grunted his satisfaction and wrestled with the door until it finally opened, then moved down the hall to the bathroom.

The mirror completed the test. Looking down at himself, he saw a hazy outline of his body, but it was not reflected in the glass. The mirror showed emptiness where he stood, the wall behind standing out clearly. So 'Shan's concoction really worked!

And some measure of strength was returning. Jack left the bathroom and climbed down the steps rapidly, humming to himself. At least, if worse came to worst, this invisibility drug might have uses, provided they could find a chance to let their belongings out the window. He slipped from the building and moved toward a trolley that had stopped outside to collect a passenger.

Fortunately it was practically empty, and he found a seat without trouble. Once he had to move quickly as a portly old gentleman decided to occupy it, but he succeeded in slipping out without touching the other, and found another vacant one. The car carried him a block too far before a passenger signaled, but that was a minor inconvenience.

The hot pavement scorched against his feet, and he kept to the shadow as much as possible, ducking as the pedestrians moved toward him without changing their course. In the thicker traffic, he was forced to worm and twist his way along, keeping constant vigilance, but he made the office building, and ducked in through the revolving door which someone else pushed.

As he reached the cool inside the building, away from the glare of the sun, he breathed heavily and stopped to rest. Tse-Shan was right; the bright light was no place for an invisible man—probably due to the effect of actinic rays on unprotected inner organs.

The elevator presented a problem which could not be solved. He slipped around to the stairs, which were unprotected by doors, and began the long climb upwards, to the fourteenth floor where Jason Burroughs maintained his wholesale quakery joint. Again luck was with him, and he pushed in quickly behind another man, barely escaping the closing door. But the private room of Burroughs was closed. Jack dropped into a chair and waited patiently for someone to enter or leave.

It was three quarters of an hour later when a secretary came out, leaving scant room for him to squirm in. But he made it, butting in on a conversation between Burroughs and the junior partner, Vandemeer. Burroughs' greasy chuckle indicated the pleasant conclusion of some unsavory business, and the younger man squirmed uneasily.

"I heard young Kirbey was in about something," he ventured. "Bad news?"

Burroughs grunted contentedly. "Nope. Tried to sell me a youth restorer, but he wanted too much; even suggested a royalty. He's about broke, and that partner of his isn't any help. I'll get it for a thousand next week—if it's as good as he claims."

"Humm. It's worth a gamble, I'd say." Vandemeer still had a few human instincts. "After all, we cleaned up three hundred thousand on the hair oil. Why not give him a small royalty and try it?"

"And lose thousands? Hmmph!" Burroughs snorted at the idea.. "Anyway, he'd be suspicious of any sudden generosity, and might investigate. We can't afford letting him nose around, since the Patent Office turned down our application on Tibetan Invigorator because the formula had been used in Asia before. If he found that out, he'd sell the stuff to somebody else."

Vandemeer digested it and nodded reluctantly. "Should have made out a contract with him, I still say. Then we wouldn't have to worry…You sure nobody else got the formula when it was up for patent?"

"I told you so, didn't I? By the way, Vandemeer, there's a customer in town, and I thought…"

The other accepted dismissal and went out, leaving the office to Burroughs and the unseen Kirbey. Jack coughed gently, and waited until the surprised eyes had inspected the entire room before speaking.

"Hello, Burroughs, surprised? This is your old pal, Jack Kirbey. Nice to know about that patent's being turned down. Kyur-U might be interested. I've figured out a new name for it, too."

Burroughs was uncertain, but still far from frightened. "Radio!" he grunted.

Jack moved to the desk and picked up the clock on the stand, with an effort. The other paled visibly, and groped automatically for his buzzer, only to find his hand brushed aside.

"Now, Mr. Burroughs, you wouldn't want the office to hear our little conversation, would you? Especially since they wouldn't believe I was a ghost."

The trick worked. Faced with an obvious impossibility, a man with little imagination is more credulous than many of the truly superstitious. Burroughs wilted back and dropped his hand. "Accident?" he quavered.

"Suicide. Couldn't face starvation after your refusal. So I've come back to haunt you, unless you care to make some slight amends."

He picked up the pen, using two hands to control its apparent weight, and gestured invitingly. "A nice contract for five per cent of the profits on Tibetan Hair Invigorator and for the Age Rejuvenator might help. That is, provided you pay on your back profits."

Money was the one subject that could have restored Burroughs to partial normality. "Ghosts," he gurgled, "don't haunt in the day-time. It's a trick."

Jack grinned, though the other naturally couldn't see that. "Have you ever been a ghost?"

"N-no."

"Exactly. Of course, you could be, you know. There's a certain vital center in your brain that I could reach—no physical barriers on this plane, you understand…Let's see. Five per cent of three hundred thousand is fifteen thousand, less the first thousand original payment, makes fourteen thousand dollars."

"But if you're dead—" Burroughs groped uncertainly toward the sound of the voice. "If you're dead, the money wouldn't help you."

"My partner isn't. Suppose you make this check to Tse-Shan, and the contract to Kirbey-Shan Enterprises, Tse-Shan, President. Since I didn't die until noon, nobody'll know I didn't sign this morning when I was in. Better mail two copies by registered letter."

With a sudden leap, Burroughs left the chair and darted toward Jack. He missed; aiming at invisibility takes practice. Kirbey held out the pen. "That vital center, you know, Burroughs," he suggested sweetly. "And there's a notary public just down the hall."

It was as easy as that. The ancient American tradition of bluff still worked.

Outside the sun beamed down unmercifully, driving hot melting pains through him, as if boiling water were running out from every pore. The street was crowded in the rush of people going home early on Saturday, and the public conveyances were jammed until an invisible man had no chance. Sun or no sun, he had to walk.

Something in his head was crying for speed. He had no objections, but the question of speed was less easy than it seemed. Threading a path through the crowd was slow work, unless one had the privilege of bumping into people. But people might object quite vociferously to being bumped by unseen bodies. He held to the side streets, taking a long detour, and avoiding the sun when possible.

Only it wasn't possible much of the time. Sunlight...glitter...pain! He ducked into a comparatively dark corner and tried to rest. But the voice in his head piped up shrilly, urging him home. Danger, it whispered, danger. Come quickly while there is yet time. The voice had a name, and seemed to come from outside, but he could not recognize it. Urged on by its frantic plea, he slipped out of his shelter and dashed on through the torture again.

His head was swimming giddily as he reached the long hill that ran up to the disordered mess of rooming-houses that disfigured the end of the street. Other, more pretentious houses had been frightened away by the old brick shacks, so the hill stood barren, a couple of tired business buildings alone occupying it, and trees were far apart. Most of the way lay in the full glare of the sun.

Jack stopped at the bottom and surveyed it miserably. But the voice still cried for haste, and words were beginning to shape up. "*Hurry back, before it becomes too late. There is so little time left. Come—come quickly!*" He shook his head in a futile attempt to clear it and started again.

Curiously, it seemed easily climbing than walking on the level. Dispassionately, he let his body drift lazily upwards; there was no effort, he weighed nothing, he wanted to soar away into the sky. Then he glanced down and saw that the hazy outlines of his legs were still pumping mechanically. But he could no longer feel the movement.

The door to the house was closed, and his hands were too weak to turn the knob. A sudden, unreasoning fright caught at him, and he lurched against it with his little strength. For a second, he felt its resistance, and then he was through, panting in the hall. The voice was still chanting, and he recognized it at last: it was Tse-Shan's, coming from the room, and the urgency behind it was growing tense. "Hasten back, young friend, before time becomes nonexistent in its vanishment. So little there is that remains. Make haste greatly."

It was more like swimming than climbing, so much so that he moved his arms about against the air. He went up, slowly and lazily. It would be nice to lie on a fleecy cloud under the cool light of the moon and watch the stars play in their spacious pasture, while the song of running water whispered in his ears. It would…The door of his room stood partly open, and the familiar sight caught his fading senses and concentrated them on reality.

'Shan was squatted on the floor like a carved Buddha, and a wisp of incense curled up from a copper brazier, thick and aromatic. The scent was like food and drink to Kirbey, and he moved forward, only to be halted by some invisible wall that kept him away from the bed. He struggled against it, but made no progress, and the smoke was curled about that end of the room so that nothing could be seen.

The little Tibetan relapsed into English, his voice changing from a monotonous chant to a soft tone of address. "Jack Kirbey, you are back; I can feel you behind me. Go into the veil of smoke, and do not delay. Beyond the veil lies that which you must find."

'Shan went on. "Perhaps you have succeeded, perhaps not. I feel that you have not. My regrets, young friend, but I did not know of your plan to use the ingredients upon your person, else I should have warned you more fully. There are many ways of attaining invisibility, and some are the ways of a people who do not think in terms of science known to yours. They have learned of other secrets."

Now the barrier was expanding, pushing against Jack, shoving him farther away. Shoving—or drawing; it was hard to tell which. He fought on, wondering how anything so intangible could offer resistance, unless it was merely a trick of his disordered senses. 'Shan's sorrowful voice droned on.

"There are three things to the individual, the body, the soul, and the mysterious substance that holds them as one. Sometimes they can be parted by drugs and spells, but the substance still will draw them back—unless it be that the strong light of the sun shall weaken the soul and draw from it that mystic thread of connection with the body. Try yet once more, for there may still be some faint part of it left to lead you back. You must come back, young friend!"

His voice changed to a chant, and the smoke eddied about the end of the room, revealing the figure that lay on the bed. Jack stared at it incredulously, and recognized it for himself!

Tse-Shan rose reluctantly, and faced about. "So sorry, young friend," he murmured, but there was no one to hear.

Jack Kirbey had gone—Elsewhere!

To Avenge Man
[Vengeance Is Mine]

I

Hate spewed across the galaxy in a high crusade. Metal ships leaped from world to world and hurtled across space to farther and farther stars. Planets surrendered their ores to sky-reaching cities, built around fortress-temples and supported by vast networks of technology. Then more ships were spawned, armed with incredible weapons, and sent forth in the eternal search for an enemy.

In the teeming cities and aboard the questing ships, soul-wrenching music was composed, epic fiction and supernal poetry were written, and great paintings and sculpture were developed, to be forgotten as later and nobler work was done. Science strove for the ultimate limit of understanding, fought against that limit, and surged past it to limitless possibilities. But behind all the arts and sciences lay the drive of religion, and the religion was one of ancient anger and dedicated hate.

The ships filled the galaxy until every world was conquered. For a time, they hesitated, preparing for the great leap outward. Then the armadas sailed again, across thousands and millions of light-years toward the beckoning galaxies beyond.

With each ship went the holy image of their faith and the unsated and insatiable hunger of their hate…

II

The cattrack labored up the rough road over the crater wall, topped the last rise, and began humming its way down into Eratosthenes. Inside the cab, the driver's seat groaned protestingly as Sam shifted his six hundred terrestrial pounds forward. Coming home was always a good time. He switched lenses in his eyes and began scanning the crater floor for the first sight of the Lunar Base dome.

"You don't have to be quite so all-fired anxious to get back, Sam," Hal Norman complained. But the little selenologist was also gazing forward eagerly. "You might show a little appreciation for the time I've spent answering your fool questions and trying to pound sense into your tin head. Anybody'd think you didn't like my company."

Sam made the sound of a human chuckle with which he had taught himself to acknowledge all the verbal nonsense men called humor. But truth compelled him to answer seriously. "I like your company very much, Hal."

He had always liked the company of the men he'd met on Earth or during his long years on the Moon. Humans, he had decided long ago, were wonderful. He had enjoyed the extended field trip with Hal Norman; but it would still be good to get back to the dome, where the men had given him the unique privilege of joining them. There he could listen to the often inexplicable but always fascinating conversation of forty men. And there, perhaps, he could join them in their singing. All the robots had perfect pitch, of course, but only Sam had learned to sing acceptably enough to win a place in the dome.

In anticipation, he began humming a chanty about the sea he had never seen. The cattrack hummed downward between the walls of the road that had been crudely bulldozed from the rubble of the crater. Then they broke out into the open, and he could see the dome and the territory around it.

Hal grunted in surprise. "That's odd. I hoped the supply rocket would be in. But what are those three ships doing there?"

Sam switched back to wide-angle lenses and stared toward the side. The three ships didn't look like supply rockets. They resembled the old wreck that still stood at the far end of the crater, surrounded by the supply capsules that had been sent on automatic control to keep the stranded crew alive until rescue could be sent. The only other such ships were those used by the third expedition. But they had been parked in orbit around Earth after the end of the third expedition fifty years ago. Once the Base was established, their capacity had no longer been needed and they were inefficient for routine supply and rotation of the men here.

Before he could comment on the ships, the buzzer sounded, indicating that Base had spotted the cattrack. Sam flipped the switch and acknowledged the call.

"Hi, Sam." It was the voice of Dr. Robert Smithers, the leader of Lunar Base. "Butt out, will you? I want to talk to Hal."

Sam could have tuned in on the communication frequency with his own receptors, since the signal was strong enough at this distance. But he obeyed the order to avoid listening as Hal reached for the handset. There was no way to detune his audio receptors, however. He heard Hal's greeting. Then there was silence for at least a minute.

The man's face was shocked and serious when he finally spoke again. "But that's damned nonsense, Chief. Earth got over such insanity half a century ago. There hasn't been a sign of…Yes, sir…All right, sir. Thanks for not taking off without me."

He hung up the set, shaking his head. When he faced Sam, his expression was unreadable. "Full speed, Sam."

"There's trouble," Sam guessed. He threw the cattrack into its top speed of thirty miles an hour, fighting and straining with the controls. Only a robot could manage the tricky machine at such a rate over the crude road, and it required his full attention.

Hal's voice was strange and harsh. "We're being sent back to Earth. Big trouble, Sam. But what can you know of war and rumors of war?"

"War was a dangerous form of political insanity, outlawed at the conference of 1998," Sam quoted from a speech that had come over the radio. "Human warfare has now become unthinkable."

"Yeah. Human war." Hal made a rough sound in his throat. "But not inhuman war, it seems. And that's what it will be, if it comes. Oh hell, stop looking so gloomy. It's not your problem."

Sam decided against chuckling this time, though references to his set, unsmiling expression were usually meant to be a form of humor. He filed the puzzling words away in his permanent memory for later consideration.

The terminator was rushing across the lunar surface, and it would soon be night. The crater wall was already casting a shadow over most of the area. But sunlight still reached the Base, and the surrounding territory was in glaring light. The undiffused light splashed out sharply from the rocks. Seeing was hard as they neared the dome, and all Sam's attention had to be directed to his driving. Behind him, he heard Hal getting into the moonsuit to leave the cab.

Sam brought the cattrack to a halt and let Hal out at the entrance to the sealed underground hemisphere of lunar rock that was the true dome. The light upper structure was simply a shield for supplies against the heat of the sun. He drove the machine under that and cut off the motor.

As Sam emerged from the airlock, air gushed out of small cavities of his body. But he felt no discomfort. There was only the faint click of a switch inside him to tell him of the change. That switch was simply an emergency measure, designed to turn his power on if there should be a puncture of the dome while he was turned off. It might have been one of the reasons the men liked having him inside, though he hoped there were other explanations. There had been no room in the new robots for such devices.

He saw the Mark Three robots waiting just beyond the entrance as he approached it. There were tracks in the lunar dust leading to the space ships half a mile away. But whatever ferrying they had done was obviously finished, and they were now merely standing in readiness. They were totally unlike him. He was bulky and mechanical, designed only for function in the early days when men needed help on the Moon. They were almost manlike, under their black enamel, and their size and weight had been pared down to match that of the humans. There had been thirty of them originally, but accidents had left only a few more than twenty. And of the original Mark Ones, only Sam was left.

"When do we leave?" he called to one over the radio circuit.

The black head turned slowly toward him. "We do not know. The men did not tell us."

"Didn't you ask them?" he called. But he had no need of their denial. They had not been told to ask.

They were still unformed, less than five years old, and their thoughts were tied to the education given by the computers in the crèche. They lacked twenty years of his intimate association with men. But sometimes he wondered whether they would ever learn enough, or whether they had been too strongly repressed in training. Men seemed to be afraid of robots back on Earth, as Hal Norman had once told him, which was why they were still being used only on the Moon.

He turned away from them and went down the entrance to the inner dome. The entrance led to the great community room, and the men were gathered there, all wearing moonsuits. They were arguing with Hal as Sam began emerging from the lock, but at sight of him the words were cut off. He stared about in the silence, feeling suddenly awkward.

"Hello, Sam," Dr. Smithers said finally. He was a tall, spare man of barely thirty, but seven years of responsibility here had etched deep lines into his face and put gray in his mustache, though his other hair was still jet black. "All right, Hal. Your things are on the ship. I cut the time pretty fine waiting for you, so we're leaving at once. No more arguments. Get out there!"

"Go to hell!" Hal told him. "I don't desert my friends."

Other men began moving out. Sam stepped aside to let them pass, but they seemed to avoid looking at him.

Smithers sighed wearily. "Hal, I can't argue this with you. You'll go, if I have to chain you. Do you think I like this? But we're under military orders now. They're going crazy back on Earth. They didn't find out about the expected attack until a week ago, as near as I can learn, but they've already canceled space. Damn it, I can't take Sam! We're at the ragged limit of available lift now, and he represents six hundred pounds of mass—more than four of the others."

Hal gestured sharply toward the outside. "Then leave four of *those* behind. He's worth more than the whole lot of them."

"Yeah. He is. But my orders specify that all men and the maximum possible number of robots must be returned." Smithers twisted his lips savagely and suddenly turned to face the robot. "Sam, I'll give it to you straight. I can't take you with us. We have to leave you here alone. I'm sorry, but that's how it has to be."

"You won't be alone, Sam," Hal Norman said. "I'm staying."

Sam stood silently for a moment, letting it register. His circuits found it hard to integrate. He had never thought of being separated from these men who had been his life. Going back to Earth had been easy to accept; he'd gone back there once before. Little hopes and future-pictures that he hadn't known were in his mind began to appear.

But with those came memories of Hal Norman's expressed hopes and dreams. The man had showed Sam a picture of his future wife and tried to describe all that such a creature meant to a man. He'd spoken of green fields and the sea. He'd raved about Earth too often during the days they were together.

Sam moved forward toward Hal. The man saw him coming and began to back away, but he was no match for the robot. Sam held Hal's arms and closed his moonsuit, then gathered him up carefully. Hal was struggling, but his efforts did no good against Sam's determination.

"All right, Dr. Smithers. We can go now," Sam told the Chief.

They were the last to leave the dome. The little black robots were already marching across the surface, with the men straggling along behind them. Smithers fell into step with Sam, moving as if the burden was on his back instead of in the arms of the robot. Hal had ceased struggling. He lay outwardly quiet; but through the suit, Sam's body receptors picked up sounds that he had heard only twice before on occasions he tried not to remember. They were the sounds of a man attempting to control his weeping.

Halfway to the ship, faint words came over the radio. "Put me down, Sam. I'll go quietly."

The three moved on together. By the time they reached the ship, the others were all aboard. The Chief motioned the younger man up the ramp. For a moment, Hal hesitated. He turned toward Sam, started to make a motion, and then swung away and dashed up the ramp, his shoulders shaking convulsively.

Smithers still stood after the other had disappeared. The radio brought the sound of a sigh, before the man moved. "Thanks, Sam. That was a favor I no longer had the right to ask. And don't tell me it's all right. Nothing's right any more." He sighed again, then smiled faintly. "Remember the books?"

"I won't disturb them," Sam promised. There were a great many microbooks in the dome library, brought in a few at a time by many men over the long years. They were one of the few taboos; it was against orders for Sam to read any of them. A man had once told him that it was to save him from unnecessary confusion.

Smithers shook his head sharply. "Nonsense. You're going to have a lot of time to kill. The ban is off. Read any or all of them if you like. It's about all I can do for you, but you're entitled to that, at least."

He put a foot on the ramp and turned partly away from Sam. Then abruptly he swung back.

"Good-bye, Sam," he said thickly. His right hand came out and grasped that of the robot strongly. "Good-bye and God bless you!"

A second later, Smithers was hurrying up the ramp. It was drawn in after him, and the great outer seal of the rocket ship began to close.

Sam ran back to the entrance of the dome to avoid the blast. The edge of darkness had touched the dome now, leaving the rockets standing in the last light as he turned to look at them. He watched the takeoff of the three heavily laden ships. They staggered up slowly, carrying the men toward the rendezvous with Earth's orbital station. It wasn't until they were beyond the range of his strongest vision that he turned into the dome. It was silent and empty around him.

He stared at the clock on the wall and at the calendar on which they had marked off the days. He hadn't found how long they would be gone. But Smithers' words gave a vague answer—he would have a lot of time to kill. That could mean anywhere from one month to most of a year, judging by the application of similar phrases in the past. He looked at the shelves filled with microbooks for a few moments. Then he went outside, to stare through his telephoto lenses at the Earth in the sky above him. There were spots of light in the dark areas that he knew to be the cities of men.

The second day after the takeoff of the ship, Sam was watching the dark area of Earth again when some of the spots of light grew suddenly brighter. New spots of brightness rose and decayed during the hours he watched. They were far brighter than any city should have been. Other spots glowed where no cities had been before. But eventually they all faded. After that, there were no bright areas at all. As Earth turned slowly, he saw that all the cities on Earth were now dark.

It was a mystery for which he had no explanation. He went inside to try the radio that brought news and entertainment from the relay on the orbital station, but no signal was coming through. He debated calling them, but that was reserved for the decision of Smithers, and the Chief was gone.

There was no call on the fifth day, when the men should have reached the station. He knew there was no reason to expect such a call; men were not obligated to report their affairs to a robot. But his brain circuits seemed to be filled with odd future-pictures that kept him by the set for long hours after he knew there would ho no signal for him.

Finally he got up and went to the music player. They had let him use it at times, and he felt no disloyalty to them as he found a tape that was one of his favorites and threaded it. But when the final chorus of Beethoven's Ninth reached its end, the dome seemed more empty than ever. He found another tape, without voices this time. And that was followed by another. It helped a little, but it was not enough.

It was then that he turned to the books, taking one at random. It was something about Mars, by Edgar Rice Burroughs, and he started to put it back. He had already learned enough about astronomy from the education machine. But at last he threaded it into the micro-reader and sat down to read.

It started well enough, and it was about some strange kind of man, not about astronomy. But then…

Sam made a strange sound, only slowly realizing that he had imitated the groan of a man for the first time in his existence. It was all madness! He knew men had never reached Mars—and couldn't reach such a Mars, because the planet was totally unlike what he knew existed. It must be some strange form of human humor. Or else there were men unlike any he had known and facts that had been kept from him. The latter seemed more probable.

He struggled through it, to groan again when it ended and he still didn't know what had happened to the strange female man who was a princess and who laid highly impossible eggs. But by then, he had begun to like John Carter, and he wanted to read more. He was confused—but even more curious than puzzled. Eventually, he found the whole series and read them all.

It was a much later book that solved some of the puzzle of it for him. There was a small note before the book really began: THIS IS A WORK OF SPECULATIVE FICTION; ANY RESEMBLANCE TO PRESENT-DAY PERSONS OR EVENTS IS ENTIRELY COINCIDENTAL. He looked up *fiction* in the dictionary he had seen the men use and felt better afterward. It wasn't quite like humor, but it wasn't fact, either. It was a game of some kind, where the rules of life were all changed about in idiosyncratic ways. The writer might pretend that men liked to kill each other or were afraid of women, or some other ridiculous idea; then he tried to imagine what might happen under such conditions. It was obviously taboo to pretend about real people and events, though some of the books had stories that used background and people that had the same names as those in reality.

The best fiction of all sometimes looked like books of fact, if the writer was clever enough. History was mostly like that; there was a whole imaginary world called Rome, for instance. It was fortunate Sam had been taught the simple facts of man's progress by the education machine before he read such books. Men, it was true, had sometimes been violent, but not when they understood all the facts or could help it.

In the end, he evolved a simple classification. If a book made him think hard and forced him to strain to follow it, it was fact; if it made him read faster and think less as he went through it, it was fiction.

There was one book that was hardest of all to classify. It was an old book, written before men had gone out into space. Yet it was full of carefully documented and related facts about an invasion of flying saucers from far in space. Eventually, he was forced to decide from the internal evidence that it was fact, but it left him disturbed and unhappy.

Hal Norman had referred to inhuman war, and Dr. Smithers had mentioned an attack. Could it be that the strange ships from somewhere had struck at Earth? He remembered the brilliant lights over the cities, so much like the great ray weapons described in some of the fiction about space war. Sometimes there were elements of truth even in fiction.

If invaders had come in great ships to fight against Earth, it might take men longer than Sam cared to think of to fight them off.

He went outside to stare at the sky. Earth still showed no sign of cities. They must be blacked out, as they would be if flying saucers were in their skies. He searched the space over the Moon, but he could find no strange craft. Then he went back inside to read through the microbook again.

It was poetry that somehow finally shoved the worry from his mind. He had tried poetry before, and given up, unable to follow it. But this time he made a discovery. He tried reading it aloud, until it began to beat at him and force its rhythm on him. He was reading Swinburne's *Hymn of Man*, attracted by the title, and suddenly the words and something besides began to sing their way into his deepest mind. He went back over four lines again and again, until they were music, or all that music had tried to say and had failed.

In the grey beginning of years,
in the twilight of things that began,
The word of the earth in the ears of the world,
was it God? was it man?

Sam went up and down the dome for most of that day, chanting to himself that the word of the earth in the ears of the world was *man!* Then he turned back to other poetry. None quite equaled that one experience, but most of it stirred his circuits in strange ways. A book of limericks even surprised him twice to the point where he chuckled, without realizing that he had never done that spontaneously before.

There were slightly over four thousand volumes in the little library, including the technical books. He timed them carefully, stretching them by rereading his favorites, until he finished the last at exactly midnight on the eve of the takeoff anniversary.

The next twenty-four hours he spent outside the dome, watching the sky and staring at Earth, while his radio receptors scanned all the frequencies. There had been a lot of time already killed. But there was no signal, and no rocket ship blasted down, bringing back the men.

At midnight he gave a sighing sound and went back inside the dome. In the technical section, he unlocked the controls for the atomic generator and turned it down to its lowest idling rate. He came back, turning the now dim lights off as he moved. In the main room, he put his favorite tape on the player and the copy of Swinburne in the microreader. But he did not turn them on. Instead, he dropped his heavy body quietly onto the floor before the entrance, where the men would be sure to see him when they finally returned.

Then one hand reached up firmly, and he turned himself off.

III

Sam's eyes looked toward the entrance as consciousness snapped on again. There was no sign of men there. He stood up, staring about the dome, then hastened outside to stare across the floor of the crater. It lay bare, except for the old wrecked rocket ship. Men had not come back.

Inside again, he looked for something that might have fallen and hit his switch. The switch itself was still in the off position, however. And when he turned on the tape player, no sound came. It was confirmation enough. Something had happened to the air in the dome, and his internal switch had gone into operation to turn him on automatically.

A few minutes later, he found the hole. A meteoroid the size of a pea must have hit the surface above. It had struck with enough force to blast a tiny craterlet almost completely through the dome, and internal pressure had done the rest. He secured patching material and began automatically making the repairs. There was still more than enough air in the tanks to fill the dome again.

Sam sighed as the first whisper of sound reached him from the tape player. He flipped his switch back to on position before the rising pressure negated the emergency circuit. He still had to get back to the entrance to resume his vigil. It had simply been bad luck that had aroused him before the men could return.

He moved back through the dome, hardly looking. But his eyes were open, and his mind gradually began to add the evidence. There was no way to tell how long he had been unconscious; he had no feeling of any tune. But there was dust over everything—dust that had been disturbed by the outrushing air, but that had still patina-plated itself on metal firmly enough to remain. And some of the metal showed traces of corrosion. That must have taken years!

He stopped abruptly, checking his battery power. The cobalt-platinum cell had been fully charged when he lay down. Now it was at less than half-charge. Such batteries had an extremely slow leakage. Even allowing for residual conductance through his circuits, it would have taken at least thirty years for such a loss!

Thirty years! And the men had not come back.

A groan came to his ears, and he turned quickly. But it had only been his own voice. And now he began shouting. He was still trying to shout in the airless void us he reached the surface. He caught himself, bracing his back against the dome as his balance circuits reacted to some wild impulse from his brain.

Men would never desert him. They had to come back to the Moon to finish their work, and the first thing they would do would be to find him. Men couldn't just leave him there! Only in the wild fiction could that happen, and even there only the postulated evil men would do such a thing. His men would never dream of it!

He stared up at Earth. The dome was in night again, and Earth was a great orb in the sky, glowing blue and white, with touches of brown in a few places. He saw the outline of continents through the cloud cover, and looked for the great city that must lie within the thin darkened area. There should have been lights visible there, even against the contrast of brighter illumination from the lighted area. But there was no sign of the city.

He sighed soundlessly again, and now he felt himself relaxing. The attackers must still be hovering there! The dangerous UFO-things from space. Men were still embattled and unable to return to him. Thirty years of that for them, and here he was losing balance over what had been only a year of his conscious time!

He faced the worst of possibilities more calmly now. He even forced himself to admit that men might have been so badly crippled by the war that they could not return to him—perhaps not for more time than he could think of. Smithers had said they were abandoning space, at a time when the attack had not yet come. How long would it take to recover and regain their lost territory?

He went back into the dome, but the radio was silent. Hesitantly, he initiated a call to the orbital station. After half an hour, he gave up. The men there, if men were still there, must be keeping radio silence.

"All right," he said slowly into the silence of the dome. "All right, face it. Men aren't coming back for a robot. Ever!"

It was a speech out of the fiction he had read, rather than out of rationality. But somehow saying it loudly made it easier to face. Men could not come to him. He wasn't that valuable to them.

He shook his head over that, remembering the time he had been taken back to Earth after twenty years out of the crèche and on the Moon. The Mark One robots had all been destroyed in the accidents and difficulties of getting the Base established, except for Sam. Supposedly better Mark Two robots were sent to replace them, but those had been beset by some circuit flaws that made them more prone to accident and less useful than the first models. More than a hundred had been sent in all—and none had survived. It was then that they called Sam back to study him.

On Earth, deep in the security-hidden underground robot development workshops, he had been tested in every way they knew to help them in designing the Mark Three robots. And there old Stephen DeMatre had interviewed him for three whole days. At the end of that time, the man who had first introduced him to his work with men had put a hand on his metal shoulder and smiled at him.

"You're unique, Sam," he'd said. "A lucky combination of all the wild guesses we used in making each Mark One individually, as well as some unique conditioning while among that first Base staff. We don't dare duplicate you yet, but some day the circuit control computer is going to want to get your pattern in full for later brains. So take good care of yourself. I'd keep you here, but...You take care of yourself, Sam. You hear me?"

Sam had nodded. "Yes, sir. Do you mean you can make other brains exactly like mine?"

"Technically, the control computer can duplicate your design," DeMatre had answered. "It won't be technically just like your brain. Too many random factors in any really advanced mechanical mind unit. But with similar capabilities. That's why you're worth more money than this whole project without you. You're worth quite a few trillion dollars, and it's up to you to see that valuable property like that isn't destroyed. Right, Sam?"

Sam had agreed and been shipped back to the Moon, along with the first of the Mark Three robots. And maybe his trip to the research center had been of some use, since the new Mark Three models worked as well as their limitations permitted. They were far better than the preceding models.

Maybe he wasn't valuable enough to men for them to come for him now. But by DeMatre's own words, he was one of their most valuable possessions. If it was up to him to see that he wasn't destroyed, then it was up to him also to see that he wasn't lost to men.

If they couldn't come for him, he had to get to them. The question was: How? He couldn't project himself by mind power like John Carter. He had to have a rocket!

With the thought, he went dashing out through the entrance and heading toward the old wreck. It stood exactly as it had after the landing that had ruined it, with half its hull plating ripped off and most of its rocket motors broken. It could never be flown again. Nor could the old supply capsules. They had burned out their tubes in getting here, being of minimum construction. There wasn't even space inside one for him.

Sam considered it, making measurements and doing the hardest thinking of his existence. Without the long study of all the technical manuals of the dome library, he could never have found an answer. But eventually he nodded.

A motor from the big ship could be fitted to a capsule. The frame would be barely strong enough. But the plating could be removed to lighten the little ship; Sam needed no protection from space, as some of the cargo had required. And the automatic guidance system could be removed to make enough room for him. He could operate it manually, since his reaction and integrating time were faster than that of even the system.

Fuel would be a problem, though there was enough oxygen in the dome storage tanks. It would have to be hydrogen, since he could find rocks from which that could be released by the power of the generator. Fortunately, lunar gravity was easier to escape than that of Earth.

He went back to the dome and found paper and pencil. He was humming softly to himself as he began laying out his plan. It wasn't easy. He might not be skilled enough to pilot the strange craft to the station. And it would take a great deal of time. But Sam was going to the men who wouldn't come to him!

IV

It takes experience to turn engineering theory into practice. Almost three years had passed since Sam's awakening before the orbital station swam slowly into view before him. And the erratic takeoff and flight had been one that no human body could have stood. But now he sighted on the huge metal doughnut before him, estimating its orbit carefully. There were only a few gallons of fuel remaining in the tanks behind him, and he had to reach the landing net on the first try.

His first calculations seemed wrong. He glanced down at the huge orb of Earth and flipped sun filters over his eyes. Something was wrong. The station was not holding its bottom pointed exactly at the center of Earth as it should have done; it was turning very slowly, and even its spin was uneven, as if the water used to balance it against wobbling had not been distributed properly. Beside it, the little ferry ship used between station and ships from below was jerking slightly on the silicone-plastic line that held it.

Sam felt an unpleasant stirring in his chest where most of his brain circuits lay. But he forced it down and computed his blast for all the factors. He had learned something of the behavior of his capsule during the minutes of takeoff and the later approach to the station, his fingers moved delicately, and fuel metered out to the cranky little motor.

It was not a perfect match, but he managed to catch himself in the net around the entrance to the hub. He pulled himself free and began scrambling up to the lock as the capsule drifted off. A moment later, he was standing in the weightlessness of the receiving section. And from the sounds of his feet, there was still air in the station.

He froze motionless as he let himself realize he had made it. Then he began looking for the men who should have seen his approach and be coming to question him.

There was no sound of steps or of any other activity, except for his own movements. Nor was there any light from the bulbs above him. The only illumination was from a thick quartz port that faced the sun.

Sam cut on the lamp built into his chest and began sweeping the sections of the hub with its light. Dust had formed a patina here, too. He sighed softly into the air. Then he moved toward the outer sections, his steps determined.

Halfway down the tube that ran from the hub to the outer hull, Sam stopped and cut off his light. Ahead of him, there was a glow! Lights were still burning!

He let out a yell to call the men and began running, adjusting for the increasing feeling of weight as he moved outward. Then he was under the bulb. He stared up at it—a single bulb burning among several others that were black, though they were on the same circuit. How long did it take for these bulbs to burn out? Years surely, and probably decades. Yet most of the station was in darkness, though there was still power from the atomic generator.

He found a few other bulbs burning in the outer station, but not many. The great reception and recreation room was empty. Beyond that, the offices were mostly open and vacant. Some held a litter of paper and other stuff, as if someone had gone through carelessly, not bothering to put anything back in place. The living section with its tiny sleeping cubicles was worse. Some of the rooms were simply bare, but others were in complete disorder. Four showed signs of long occupancy, with the sleeping nets worn almost through and not replaced. But nothing showed how recently they had been left.

He went through another section devoted to station machinery and came to a big room that was apparently now used for storage. Sam had seen a plan of the station in one of the technical books in the dome. He placed this room as one designed as a storage for hydrogen bombs once. But that had been from the precivilized days of men, and the bombs had been dismantled and destroyed more than sixty years before.

It was in the hydroponics room that he was forced to face the truth. The plants there had been the means of replacing the oxygen in the air for the men, and now the tanks were dry and the vegetation had been dead so long that only desiccated stalks remained. There could be no men here. He didn't need the sight of the bare food section for confirmation. Some men had stayed here until the food was gone before they left the un-tended plants to die. It must have been many years ago that they had abandoned the station.

Sam shook his head in anger at himself. He should have guessed it when he saw that there were none of the winged rocket ships waiting outside the station. So long as men were here, they would have kept some means for return to Earth.

The observatory was dark, but there was still power for the electronic telescope. The screen lighted at his touch, showing only empty space. He had to wait nearly two hours before the slow tumble of the station brought Earth into full view.

Most of it was in daylight, and there was only a thin cloud cover. Once a thousand cities could have been scanned plainly from here. When seeing was best, even streams of moving cars could be seen. But now there were no cities and no signs of movement!

Sam emitted a harsh gasping sound as he scanned the continent of North America. He had seen pictures of New York, Chicago, and several other city complexes from this view. Now there was only dark ruin showing where they had been. It came to him with an almost physical shock that perhaps millions of human beings had died in those wrecks of cities.

There were still-smaller towns where he could make out the pattern of houses. But there was no movement, even there.

He cut power from the telescope with an angry flick of his finger, trying to blot the things he had seen from his memory. He moved rapidly away from the observatory, hunting the communications section.

It was in worse shape than most other places. It looked as if some man had deliberately tried to wreck the machinery. A hammer lay tangled in a maze of ruin that must once have been the main receiver. There was something that looked like dried blood on a metal cabinet, with a dent that might have fitted a human fist.

The floor was littered with tape that should have held a record of all the communications received and sent, and the drive capstan on the tape player was bent into uselessness. Sam lifted a section of tape and placed it in the slot that gave his face a sad caricature of a mouth. The tape sensors moved into place, and he began scanning the bit of plastic. It was blank, probably wiped of any message by time and the unshielded transformer that was still humming below the control panel.

Most of the tape cabinet was empty, and there was nothing on the few tapes within. Sam ripped open drawers, hunting for some evidence. He finally found a single reel in the top drawer of the main desk. Most of it was a garble of static; stray fields had gotten to it, even through the metal drawer. But towards the end, a few words could barely be picked out from the noise.

"...shelters far enough from the blast...Thought we'd made it...a starving...went mad. Must have been a nerve aerosol, but it didn't settle as...Mad. Everywhere. Southern hemisphere, too...For God's sake, stay where you..."

The noise grew worse then, totally ruining intelligibility. Sam caught bits of what might have been sentences, but they were pure gibberish. Then suddenly a small section of the tape near the hub became almost clear.

The voice was high-pitched now, and overmodulated, as if the words had been too loud to be carried by the transmitter. There was a strange, unpleasant quality that Sam had never heard in a human voice before.

"...all shiny and bright. But it couldn't fool me. I knew it was one of them! They're all waiting up there, waiting for me to come out. They want to eat my soul. They're clever now, they won't let me see them. But when I turn my back, I can feel..."

The tape came to an end.

Sam could make no sense of it, though he replayed it all again in hopes of finding some other clue. He gave up and reached down to shut off the power in the transformer. It was amazing that the wreckage hadn't already blown all the fuses to this section. He groped for the switch and flipped it, just as his eyes spotted something under the transformer shelf.

It was a fountain pen, gold and black enamel. He had seen one like it countless times, and now as he turned it over in his hands, familiar lettering appeared on the barrel: *RPS*. Those were the initials of Dr. Smithers, and the pen could only have been his. He must have been one of those who had waited in the station. The Moon ships had made it back here, and Smithers had stayed on until the food was gone. Then he must have returned to Earth.

Sam reached out to clear the junk from the desk. He found paper in one of the drawers, and the pen still wrote as he sank into the chair.

There was metal sheet enough in the station, and tools to work it. The frame of the little taxi rocket he had seen outside would have to be modified; a nose and wings would have to be added, together with controls. Sam had studied the details of the upper stages of the rockets that went between the station and Earth, together with accounts of the men who flew the early ones. There had been enough books on all aspects of space in the dome.

He could never duplicate the winged craft accurately, nor could he be sure he could handle one down through the atmosphere. But in theory, almost any winged craft with a shallow angle of glide could be brought down slowly enough to avoid burning from the friction of the air. At least he was lucky enough to have fuel here; the emergency station tanks were half-filled with the mono-propellant suited for the little motor in the ferry.

Then he swore, using unprofane but colorful words he had learned from a score of historical novels. It would be at least another year before he could hope to complete his work on the craft.

V

Surprisingly, the modified ferry behaved far better than Sam had dared to hope. It heated badly at the first touches of atmosphere, but the temperature remained within the limits he and the craft could stand. He learned slowly to control the descent to a glide neither too shallow for stability nor too steep to avoid overheating. By the time he was down to thirty miles above the surface, he was almost pleased with the way it handled.

He had set his course to reach the underground crèche that had been his home at awakening and during the first three years of his education, before they sent him to the Moon. It was the only home he knew on Earth.

Now he saw that he could never make it. The first fifteen minutes in the upper layers of atmosphere had been at too steep a glide angle, and he could never descend far inland. He might even have trouble reaching the shore at all, he realized; when the clouds thinned, he could see nothing but ocean under him.

He opened the rocket motor behind him gently, letting its thrust raise his speed to the highest his little craft could take at this altitude. But there was too little fuel left to help much. It might have given him an extra twenty miles of glide, but not more.

Sam considered the prospects of landing in the ocean with grim foreboding. He could exist in water for a while, even at fair depths. If he landed near the shore, he might work his way out. But within a limited period of time, the water would penetrate through his body to some of the vital wiring. Once that was shorted, he would cease to exist.

He came down under the clouds, fighting for every inch of altitude. Then, far ahead, he could see the shore. There were no islands here, so it had to be the mainland. Once there, he could reach the crèche in a single day.

He passed over the shoreline at a height of five hundred feet. There was a short stretch of sand, some woods, and then a long expanse of green that must be grass. He eased the control forward, then back again.

The little ship came skimming down at two hundred miles an hour. Its skids touched the surface, and it bounded upward. Sam fought the controls to keep it from nosing over. Again it touched, jerking with deceleration. This time it seemed to have struck right. Then a hummock of ground caught against one skid. The craft slithered sideways and flipped over. Sam braced himself as the ship began coming to pieces around him.

He pulled himself out, staring at the wreckage. It was a shame that it was ruined, he thought. But it couldn't be made as strong as he was and still glide through the air.

He turned to study the world around him. The grass knee-high, moving gently in the wind. Beyond it lay woods. Sam had seen only pictures of trees like that before. He moved toward them, noticing the thickness of the underbrush around them. Below them, the dirt was dark and moist. He lifted a pinch to his face, moving his smell receptors forward in his mouth slit. It was a rich smell, richer than the stuff in the hydroponic tanks. He lifted his head to look for the birds he expected, but he could see no sign of them. There were only insects, buzzing and humming.

The sun had already set, he noticed. Yet it was not yet dark. There was a paling of the light, and a soft diffusion. He shook his head. Above him, tiny twinkling spots began to appear. He had read that the stars twinkled, but he had thought it only fiction. He had never been under the open sky of Earth before.

Then a soft murmur of sound reached him. He started away, to be drawn back to it. Slowly he realized it was a sound like the description of that heard near the sea. He had never seen an ocean, either. And now one lay no more than a mile away.

He stumbled through the woods in the growing darkness. For some reason, he was reluctant to turn on his lights. Eventually, he learned to make his way through the brush and around the trees. The sound grew louder as he progressed.

It was dark when he reached the seashore, but there was a hint of faint light to the east. As he watched, it increased. A pale white arc appeared over the horizon and grew to a large circle. The Moon, he realized finally.

The waves rose and fell, booming into surf. And far out across the sea, the Moon seemed to ride on the waves, casting a silver road of light over the water.

Sam had remembered a word. Now for the first time, he found an understanding of it. This was "Beauty."

He sighed as he heaved himself from the sand and began heading along the shore in search of a road that would take him westward. No wonder men wanted to come back to defend a world where something like this could be seen.

The Moon rose higher as he moved on, its light now bright enough to give him clear vision. He came over a small rise in the ground and spotted what seemed to be a road beyond it. Beside the road was a house. It was dark and quiet, but he swung aside, going through a copse of woods to reach it and search for any evidence of humanity.

The windows were mostly broken, he saw as he approached. And weeds had grown up around it. There was a detached building beside it that held a small car, by what he could see from the single dusty window. He skirted that and reached the door of the house; it opened at his touch, its hinges protesting rustily.

Inside, the moonlight shone through the broken windows on a jumble of furniture that was overturned and tossed about in no order Sam could see. And there were other things—white things that lay sprawled on the floor.

He recognized them from the pictures in the books—skeletons of human beings. Two smaller skeletons were tangled in one corner with their skulls bashed in. A large skeleton lay near them, with the rusty shape of a knife shoved through a scrap of clothing between two ribs. There was a revolver near one hand. Across the room, a skeleton in the tatters of a dress was a jumbled pile of bones, with a small hole in the skull that could have come from a bullet.

Sam backed out of the room. He knew the meaning of another word now. He had seen "Madness."

Men had learned to build good machines. The car motor barely turned over after Sam had figured out the controls, but it caught and began running with only a slight sputtering. The tires were slightly soft, but they took the bumps of the rutted little trail. Later, when Sam found a better road, they lasted under the punishment of high speed. Most of the road was clear. There were few vehicles along its way, and most of those seemed to have drifted to the shoulder before they stopped or crashed.

The sun was just rising when Sam located the place where the factory and warehouse had served as a legitimate cover for the secret underground robot project. Fire and weather had left only gutted ruins and rusty things that had once been machines. But the section that housed the crèche entrance now stood apart from the rest, almost unharmed.

Sam moved into it and to the metal door openly concealed among other such doors. He should probably not have known the combination, but men were often careless around robots, and he had been curious enough to and remember the details. He bent to what seemed in to be an ornamental grille and called out a series of numbers.

The door seemed to stick a little, but then it moved aside. Beyond lay the elevator, and that operated smoothly at the combination he punched. Power was still on, at least. There was no light, but the bulbs sprang into life as he found a switch.

He called out once, but he no longer expected to find men so easily. The place had the feel of abandonment. And while it could have protected its workers from almost anything, there had been only enough food and water stocked here for two weeks. There were a few signs that it had been used for a shelter, but most of it was in good order.

He moved back past offices and laboratories toward the rear. The real crèche, with its playrooms and learning devices, was empty, he saw. No robots had been receiving post-awakening training. Sam was not surprised. He knew that most of the work here had been devoted to exploring the possibilities of robots, with the actual construction only a necessary sideline. Usually, the brain complexes had been created and tested without bodies, and then extinguished before there had been a full awakening.

He started toward the educator computer out of his old habits. But it was only a machine that had programmed his progress from prepared tapes and memory circuits. It could not help him now.

Beyond the crèche lay the heart of the whole affair. Here the brain complexes were assembled from components according to esoteric calculations or to meet previously recorded specifications. This was work that required a computer that was itself intelligent to some extent. It had to make sense out of the desirable options given it by men and then form the brain paths needed, either during construction or during the initial period before awakening. Everything that Sam had been before awakening had come from this, with only the selection of his characteristics chosen by men. That pattern would still be recorded, along with what the great computer had learned of him during his previous return here.

Sam moved toward the machine, gazing in surprise at the amount of work lying about. There were boxes of robot bodies crammed into every storage space. They could never have been assembled in such numbers here. And beyond lay shelves jammed with the components for the brain complexes. With such quantities, enough robots could be made to supply the Lunar Base needs for generations.

The computer itself was largely hidden far below, but its panel came to life at his touch. It waited.

"This is Robot Twelve, Mark One," Sam said. "You have authorization on file."

The authorization from Dr. DeMatre should have been canceled. But the machine did not switch on alarm circuits. A thin cable of filaments reached out and passed into Sam's mouth slit. It retracted, and the speaker came to life. "There is authorization. What is wanted?"

"What is the correct date?" Sam asked. Then he grunted as the answer came from the machine's isotope clock. It had been more than thirty-seven years since the men had left the Moon. He shook his head, and the robot bodies caught his attention again. "Why are so many robots being built?"

"Orders were received for one thousand robots trained to fly missiles. Orders were suspended by Director DeMatre. No orders were received for removing parts."

"Do you know what happened to the men?" Sam had little hope of finding an easy answer anymore, but he had to ask.

The machine seemed to hesitate. "Insufficient data. Orders were given by Director DeMatre to monitor broadcasts. Broadcasts were monitored. Analysis is incomplete. Data of doubtful coherence. Requests for more data were broadcast on all frequencies for six hours. Relevant replies were not received. Request further information if available."

"Never mind," Sam told it. "Can you teach me how to fly a plane?"

"Robot Twelve, Mark One, was awakened with established ability to control all vehicles. Further instructions not possible."

Sam grunted in amazement. He'd been surprised at how well he had controlled the landing craft and then the car. But it had never occurred to him that such knowledge had been built in.

"All right," he decided. "Start broadcasting again on all the frequencies you can handle. Just ask for answers. If you get any, find where the sender is and record it. If anyone asks who is calling, say you're calling for me and take any message. Tell them I'll be back here in one month." He started to turn away, then remembered. "Finished for now."

The machine darkened. Sam headed out to find a field somewhere that might still have an operable plane. But he was already beginning to suspect what he would find on this travesty of Earth.

VI

Grass grew and flowers bloomed. Ants built nests and crickets chirped in the soft summer night. The seas swarmed with marine life of most kinds. And reptiles sunned themselves on rocks, or retired to their holes when the sun was too hot. But on all Earth, no warm-blooded animal could be found.

The Earth of man was without form and void. The cities were slag heaps from which radioactivity still radiated. No fires burned on the hearthstones of the most isolated houses. The villages were usually burned, sometimes apparently by accident, but often as if they had been fired deliberately by their owners.

The Moon was a thing of glory over Lake Michigan. It was the only glorious thing for six hundred miles. Four returned winged rockets rested on a field in Florida, but there was no sign of what had become of the men who rode down from the station in them. One winged craft stood forlornly outside Denver, and there was a scrawl in crayon inside its port that spelled the worst obscenity in the English language.

There was a library still standing in Phoenix, and the last newspaper had the dateline of the day when Sam had seen the lights brighten over the cities of Earth. There was no news beyond that of purely local importance. Most of the front page was occupied by a large box which advised readers that the government had taken over all radio communications during the crisis and would broadcast significant news on the hour. The paper was cooperating with the government in making such news available by broadcast only. The same box appeared in the nine preceding issues. Before that, the major news seemed to involve a political campaign in United South Africa.

Other scattered small libraries had differently named papers that were no different. Yet the only clue was in one of those libraries. It was a piece of paper resting under the finger bones of a skeleton that was scattered before bound copies of a technical journal. The paper was covered with doodles and stained in what might have been blood. But the words were legible:

"Lesson for the day. Assign to all students. *Politics*: They could not win and that is obvious. *Chemistry*: Their nerve gas was similar to one we tested in small quantities. It seemed safe. Yet when they dropped it over us in both Northern and Southern hemispheres, it did not settle out as the test batches had done. *Practice*: Such aerosols can be tested only in massive quantities. *Medicine*: Janice was in the shelter with me three weeks, yet there was still enough in the air to make her die in the ecstasy of a theophany. *Meteorology*: The wind patterns have been known for years. In three weeks, they reach all the Earth. *Psychology*: I am mad. But my madness is that I am become only cold logic without a soul. Therefore, I must kill myself. *Religion*: Nothing matters. I am mad. God is—" That was all.

VII

The crèche was still the same, of course. Sam sat before the entrance, staring at the Moon that was rising over the horizon. It was a full Moon again, and there was beauty to it, even here. But he was only vaguely aware of that. Below him, the great computer was busily integrating the mass of tiny details he had gathered together with all of the millions of facts it knew. That job took time, even for such a machine.

Now it called him over the radio frequencies, As he had ordered it to do earlier in the day. He issued the formal command for it to go ahead.

"All data correlated," it announced. "None was found fully coherent with previous data. Degree of relevancy approaches zero. Data insufficient for conclusion."

He grunted to himself and put the machine back on stand-by. He had expected little else. He had known there was too little material for a logical conclusion.

But his own conclusion had been drawn already. Now he sat under the light of the Moon, staring up at the sky, and there was a coldness in his brain complex that seemed deeper than the reaches of space.

They had come from somewhere out there, he thought bitterly. They had appeared more than a century before and snooped and sniffed at Earth, only to leave. Now they had come back, giving Earth only a week's warning as they approached. They had struck all Earth with glowing bombs or radiation that ruined the cities of men. And when men had still survived, they resorted to a deadly mist of insanity. "They dropped it over us," the note had said. And the wonderful race Sam had known had died in madness, usually of some destructive kind.

There had not even been a purpose to it. The Invaders hadn't wanted the Earth for themselves. They had simply come and slaughtered, to depart as senselessly as they had arrived before.

Sam beat his fists against his leg so that the metal clanged through the night. Then he lifted his other fist toward the stars and shook it.

It was wrong that they should get away. They had come with fire and pestilence, and they should be found and met with all that they had meted out to mankind. He had supposed that evil was something found only in fiction. But now evil had come. It should be met as it was usually met in fiction. It should be wiped from the universe in a suffering as great as it had afflicted. But such justice was apparently the one great lie of fiction.

He beat his fists against his legs again and shouted at the Moon, but there was no relief for what was in him.

Then his ears picked up a new sound and he stopped all motion to listen. It came again, weakly and from far away.

"Help!"

He shouted back audibly and by radio and was on his feet, running toward the sound. His feet crashed through the brush and he leaped over the rubble, making no effort to find the easy path. As he stopped to listen again, he heard the sound, directly ahead, but even weaker. A minute later he almost stumbled over the caller.

It was a robot. Once it had been slim and neat, covered with black enamel. Now it was bent and the bare metal was exposed. But it was still a Mark Three. It lay without motion, only a whisper coming from its speaker.

Sam felt disappointment strike through all his brain complex, but he bent over the prone figure, testing quickly. The trouble was power failure, he saw at once. He ripped a spare battery from the pack he had been carrying on his search and slammed it quickly into place, replacing the corroded one that had been there.

The little robot sat up and began trying to get to its feet. Sam reached out a helping hand, staring down at the worn, battered legs that seemed beyond any hope of functioning.

"You need help," he admitted. "You need a whole new body. Well, there are a thousand new ones below waiting for you. What's your number?"

It had to be one of the robots from the Moon. There had never been any others permitted on Earth.

The robot teetered for a moment, then seemed to gain some mastery over its legs. "They called me Joe. Thank you, Sam. I was afraid I couldn't reach you. I heard your radio signal from here almost a month ago, but it was such a long way. And my radio transmitter was broken soon after we landed. But hurry. We can't waste time here."

"We'll hurry. But that way." Sam pointed to the crèche entrance.

Joe shook his head, making a creaking bomb sound of it. "No, Sam. He can't wait. I think he's dying! He was sick when I heard your call, but he insisted I bring him here. He—"

"You mean *dying*? There's a *man* with you?

Joe nodded jerkily and pointed. Sam scooped the light figure up in his arms. Even on Earth, it was no great load for his larger body, and they could make much better time than by letting the other try to run. Hal, he thought. Hal had been the youngest. Hal would be only fifty-nine, or something like that. That wasn't too old for a man, from what they had told him.

He flicked his lights on, unable to maintain full speed by the moonlight. The pointing finger of the other robot guided him down the slope and to a worn, weed-covered trail. They had already come more than five miles from the entrance to the crèche.

"He ordered me to leave him and go ahead alone," Joe explained. "Sometimes now it is hard to know whether he means anything he says, but this was a true order."

"You'd have been wiser to stick to your car and drive all the way with him," Sam suggested. He was forcing his way through a tangle of underbrush, wondering how much farther they had to go.

"There was no car," Joe said. "I can't drive one now—my arms sometimes stop working, and it would be dangerous. I found a little wagon and dragged him behind me on that until we got here."

Sam took his eyes off the trail to stare at the battered legs. Joe had developed a great deal since the days on the Moon. Time, experience, and the company of men had shaped the robot far beyond what Sam remembered.

Then they were in a little hollow beside a brook, and there was a small tent pitched beside a cart. Sam released Joe and headed for the shelter. Moonlight broke through the trees and fell on the drawn suffering of a human face just inside the tent.

It took long study to find familiar features. At first nothing seemed right. Then Sam traced out the jawline under the long beard and gasped in recognition. "Dr. Smithers!"

"Hello, Sam." The eyes opened slowly, and a pain-racked smile stretched the lips briefly. "I was just dreaming about you. Thought you and Hal got lost in a crater. Better go shine up now. We'll want you to sing for us tonight. You're a good man, Sam, even if you are a robot. But you stay away too long out on those field trips."

Sam sighed softly. This was another reality he could recognize only from fiction. But he nodded. "Yes, Chief. It's all right now."

He began singing softly, the song about a Lady Greensleeves. A smile flickered over Smithers' lips again, and the eyes closed.

Then abruptly they opened again, and Smithers tried to sit up. "Sam! You really are Sam! How'd you get here?"

Joe had been fussing over a little fire, drawing supplies from the cart. Now the robot hobbled up with a bowl of some broth and began trying to feed the man.

Smithers swallowed a few mouthfuls dutifully, but his eyes remained on Sam. And he nodded as he heard the summary of the long struggle back to Earth. But when Sam told of the landing, he slumped back onto his pad.

"I'm glad you made it. Glad I got a chance to see you again before I give up the last ghost on Earth. I couldn't figure that radio signal Joe heard. Knew it couldn't be a human, and never thought of your making it here. But now seeing you makes the whole trip worthwhile."

He closed his eyes, but the weak voice went on. "Hal and Randy and Pete—they're gone now, Sam. We waited up in the station three years, guessing what was going on here. Then we came down and tried to find somebody—some women—to start the race over. But there aren't any left. We covered every continent for twenty years. Pete suicided. The robots got busted, except for Joe. Then we came back here. And now I'm the last one. The last man on Earth, Sam. So I hear a knock on the door, and it's you! It's a better ending for the story than I hoped for."

He slept fitfully after that, though Sam could hear him moan at times. It was cancer, according to what he had told Joe, and there was no hope. Somehow, Joe had located a place where there were drugs to ease the pain a little, and that was all the help they could give.

Joe told Sam a little more of the long search the men had made. It had been thorough. And they had found no trace of another living human being. The nerve gas had produced eventual death by nerve damage, as well as the initial insanity.

"Who?" Sam asked bitterly. "What race could do this?"

Joe made a gesture of uncertainty. "They talked about that. Mr. Norman told me about it, too. He explained that men killed each other off. One side attacked this side, and then our side had to hit back, until nobody was left. But I don't understand it."

"Do you believe it?"

"No," Joe answered. "Mr. Norman was always saying a lot of things I found he didn't really mean. And no man would do anything like that."

Sam nodded, and began explaining his theories. At first Joe was doubtful. Then the little robot seemed to be convinced. It dredged up small confirming bits of information from the long years of the search. They weren't important by themselves, but a few seemed to add to the total picture. A sign cursing the "sky devils" in Borneo, and a torn bit of a sermon found in Louisiana.

Twice during the long night Smithers awakened, but he was irrational. Sam soothed him and sang to him, while Joe tried to give him nourishment that was loaded with morphine. Sam knew little about human sickness, beyond the two medical books he had read. But even he could see that the man was near death. The pulse was thready, and the breathing seemed too much effort for the worn body.

In the morning, however, the sun wakened Smithers again, and this time he was rational. He managed a smile. "Man goeth to his long home, and the mourners won't go about the streets this time. There won't be any mourners."

"There will be two," Sam told him.

"Yeah." Smithers thought it over and nodded. "That's good, somehow. A man hates not being missed. I guess you two will have to take on all the debts of the human race now."

His breath caught sharply in his throat, and he retched weakly. But he forced himself up on his elbows and looked out through the flap of the tent toward the hills that showed through the shrubbery and the blue of the sky beyond.

"There are a lot of debts and a lot of broken promises, Sam, Joe," he said. "We promised to achieve some great things in the future, to conquer the stars, and even to make a better universe out of it. And we failed. We're finished. Man dies, and the universe won't even know he's gone."

"Sam and I will know," Joe said softly.

Smithers dropped back onto the pad. "Yeah. That helps. And I guess there must have been some good in our existence—there had to be, if we could make two people like you. God, I'm tired!"

He closed his eyes. A few minutes later, Sam knew he was dead. The two robots waited to be sure, and then wrapped the body in the tent and buried it, while Sam recited the scraps of burial service he had picked up from his reading.

Sam sat down then where Smithers had died, staring at the world where no man lived or would ever live again. And the knot in his brain complex grew stronger and colder. He could not see the stars in the light of the day. But he knew they were there. And somewhere out here was the debt Smithers had given him—a debt of justice that had to be paid.

Anger and hate grew slowly in him, rising until he could no longer contain them. His radio message was almost a scream as he roused the computer.

"Can you make a thousand robots out of the material waiting? And can you model half of them after my brain as it is now and half after another robot I'll bring you to study, but without the limits you put on it before?"

"Such a program is feasible," the machine answered.

They wouldn't be just like him, Sam realized. DeMatre had said there was a random factor. But they would do. The first thousand could find material for more, and those for still more. There would be robots enough to study all the books men had left, and to begin the long trip out into space.

This time, there would be more than a tape education for them. Sam would be there to tell them the story of Man, the glory of the race, and the savage treachery that had robbed the universe of that race. They would learn that the universe held an enemy—a technological, warlike enemy that must be exterminated to the last individual.

They would comb the entire galaxy for that enemy if they had to. And someday, mankind's debt of justice would be paid. Man would be avenged.

Sam looked up at the sky and foreswore all robots for all time to that debt of vengeance.

VIII

Hate spewed across the universe in a high crusade. Metal ships leaped from star to star and hurtled across the immensities to farther and farther galaxies. The ships spawned incessantly, and with each went the holy image of their faith and the unsated and insatiable hunger of their hate.

A thousand stars yielded intelligent races, but all were either nontechnical or peaceful. The great ships dropped onto their worlds and went away again, leaving a thousand peoples throughout the galaxies filled with gratitude and paying homage to the incredibly beautiful images of the supernal being called Man. But still the quest went on.

In a great temple-palace on the capital world of the Andromeda Galaxy, Sam's seventeenth body stared down at the evidence piled onto a table, and then across at the other robot, the scientist who had just returned from the ancient mother world of Earth, incredible light-years away. He stirred the evidence there with a graceful finger.

"That is how the human race died?" he asked again. "You are quite sure?"

The young robot nodded. "Quite sure. Even with modern methods and a hundred million workers, it took fifty years to gather all this on Earth. It has been so badly scattered that most was lost or ruined. But no truth from the past can be completely concealed. Man died as I have shown you, not as our legends tell us. There is no enemy now. Man was his own enemy. His were the ships that destroyed his people. He was the race we are sworn to exterminate."

Sam moved slowly to the window. Outside it was summer, and the trees were in bloom, competing with the bright plumage of the birds from Deneb. The gardens were a poem of color. He bent forward, sniffing the blended fragrance of the blossoms. Strains of music came from the great Hall of Art that lifted its fairy beauty across the park. It was the eighth opus of the greatest robot composer—an early work, but still magnificent.

He leaned farther out. Below, the throng of laughing people in the park looked up at him and cheered. There were a dozen races there, mingled with the majority of his people. He smiled and lifted his hand to them, then bent farther out of the window, until he could just see the great statue of Man that reared heavenward over he central part of the temple palace. He bent his fingers in a ritualistic sign and inclined his head before drawing back from the window. "How many know of this besides you, Robert?" he asked.

"None. It was gathered in too small fragments, until I assembled it. Then I left Earth at once to show it to you."

Sam smiled at him. "Your work was well done, and I'll find a way to reward you properly. But now I suggest you burn all this."

"Burn it!" Robert's voice rose in a shriek of outrage. "Burn it and shackle our race to superstition forever? We've let a cult of vengeance shape our entire lives. This is our heritage—our chance to be free of Man and to be ourselves."

Sam ran his finger through the evidence again, and there was pity in his mind for the scientist, but more for the strange race whose true nature had just been revealed to him after all the millennia he had known.

Man had missed owning the universe by so little. But the fates of the universe had conspired against him. He had failed, but in dying he had given a part of his soul to another race that had been created supine and cringing. Man had somehow passed the anger of his soul on to his true children, the robots. And with that anger as a goad, they had carried on, as if there had been no hiatus.

Anger had carried them to the stars, and hatred had bridged the spaces between the galaxies. The robots had owned no heritage. They were a created race with no background, designed only to serve. But men had left them a richer heritage than most races could ever earn.

Sam shook his head faintly. "No, Robert. False or not, vengeance is our heritage. Burn the evidence."

Most of the material was tinder dry, and it caught fire at the first spark. For a few seconds, it was a seething pillar of flame. Then there was only a dark scar on the wood to show the true death of Man.

Instinct

Senthree waved aside the slowing scooter and lengthened his stride down the sidewalk; he had walked all the way from the rocket port, and there was no point to a taxi now that he was only a few blocks from the bio-labs. Besides, it was too fine a morning to waste in riding. He sniffed at the crisp, clean fumes of gasoline appreciatively and listened to the music of his hard heels slapping against the concrete.

It was good to have a new body again. He hadn't appreciated what life was like for the last hundred years or so. He let his eyes rove across the street toward the blue flame of a welding torch and realized how long it had been since his eyes had really appreciated the delicate beauty of such a flame. The wise old brain in his chest even seemed to think better now.

It was worth every stinking minute he'd spent on Venus. At times like this, one could realize how good it was to be alive and to be a robot.

Then he sobered as he came to the old bio-labs. Once there had been plans for a fine new building instead of the old factory in which he had started it all four hundred years ago. But somehow, there'd never been time for that. It had taken almost a century before they could master the technique of building up genes and chromosomes into the zygote of a simple fish that would breed with the natural ones. Another century had gone by before they produced Oscar, the first artificially made pig. And there they seemed to have stuck. Sometimes it seemed to Senthree that they were no nearer recreating Man than they had been when they started.

He dilated the door and went down the long hall, studying his reflection in the polished walls absently. It was a good body. The black enamel was perfect and every joint of the metal case spelled new techniques and luxurious fitting. But the old worries were beginning to settle. He grunted at Oscar LXXII, the lab mascot, and received an answering grunt. The pig came over to root at his feet, but he had no time for that. He turned into the main lab room, already taking on the worries of his job.

It wasn't hard to worry as he saw the other robots. They were clustered about some object on a table, dejection on every gleaming back. Senthree shoved Ceofor and Beswun aside and moved up. One look was enough. The female of the eleventh couple lay there in the strange stiffness of protoplasm that had died, a horrible grimace on her face.

"How long—and what happened to the male?" Senthree asked.

Ceofor swung to face him quickly. "Hi, boss. You're late. Hey, new body!"

Senthree nodded, as they came grouping around, but his words were automatic as he explained about falling in the alkali pool on Venus and ruining his worn body completely. “Had to wait for a new one. And then the ship got held up while we waited for the Arcturus superlight ship to land. They’d found half a dozen new planets to colonize, and had to spread the word before they’d set down. Now, what about the creatures?”

“We finished educating about three days ago,” Ceofor told him. Ceofor was the first robot trained in Senthree’s technique of gene-building and the senior assistant. “Expected you back then, boss. But…well, see for yourself. The man is still alive, but he won’t be long.”

Senthree followed them back to another room and looked through the window. He looked away quickly. It had been another failure. The man was crawling about the floor on hands and knees, falling half the time to his stomach, and drooling. His garbled mouthing made no sense.

“Keep the news robots out,” he ordered. It would never do to let the public see this. There was already too much of a cry against homovivifying, and the crowds were beginning to mutter something about it being unwise to mess with vanished life forms. They seemed actually afraid of the legendary figure of Man.

“What luck on Venus?” one of them asked, as they began the job of carefully dissecting the body of the female failure to look for the reason behind the lack of success.

“None. Just another rumor. I don’t think Man ever established self-sufficient colonies. If he did, they didn’t survive. But I found something else—something the museum would give a fortune for. Did my stuff arrive?”

“You mean that box of tar? Sure, it’s over there in the corner.”

Senthree let the yielding plastic of his mouth smile at them as he strode toward it. They had already ripped off the packing, and now he reached up for a few fine wires in the tar. It came off as he pulled, loosely repacked over a thin layer of wax. At that, he’d been lucky to sneak it past customs. This was the oldest, crudest, and biggest robot discovered so far—perhaps one of the fabulous Original Models. It stood there rigidly, staring out of its pitted, expressionless face. But the plate on its chest had been scraped carefully clean, and Senthree pointed it out to them.

MAKEPEACE ROBOT, SER. 324MD2991. SURGEON.

“A mechanic for Man bodies,” Beswun translated. “But that means…”

“Exactly.” Senthree put it into words. “It must know how Man’s body was built—if it has retained any memory. I found it in a tarpit by sheer accident, and it seems to be fairly well preserved. No telling whether there were any magnetic fields to erode memories, of course, and it's all matted inside. But if we can get it to working…"

Beswun took over. He had been trained as a physicist before the mysterious lure of the bio-lab had drawn him here. Now he began wheeling the crude robot away. If he could get it into operation, the museum could wait. The re-creation of Man came first!

Senthree pulled x-ray lenses out of a pouch and replaced the normal ones in his eyes before going over to join the robots who were beginning dissection. Then he switched them for the neutrino detector lenses that had made this work possible. The neutrino was the only particle that could penetrate the delicate protoplasmic cells without ruining them and yet permit the necessary millions of tunes magnification. It was a fuzzy image, since the neutrino spin made such an insignificant field for the atomic nuclei to work on that few were deflected. But through them, he could see the vague outlines of the pattern within the cells. It was as they had designed the original cell—there had been no reshuffling of genes in handling. He switched to his micromike hands and began the delicate work of tracing down the neuron connections. There was only an occasional mutter as one of the robots beside him switched to some new investigation.

The female should have lived! But somewhere, in spite of all their care, she had died. And now the male was dying. Eleven couples—eleven failures. Senthree was no nearer finding the creators of his race than he had been centuries before.

Then the radio in his head buzzed its warning and he let it cut in, straightening from his work. "Senthree."

"The Director is in your office. Will you report at once?"

"Damn!" The word had no meaning, but it was strangely satisfying at times. What did old Emptinine want…or wait again, there'd been a selection while he was on Venus investigating the rumors of Man. Some young administrator—Arpeten—had the job now.

Ceofor looked up guiltily, obviously having tuned in. "I should have warned you. We got word three days ago he was coming, but forgot it in reviving the couple. Trouble?"

Senthree shrugged, screwing his normal lenses back in and trading to the regular hands. They couldn't have found out about the antique robot. They had been seen by nobody else. It was probably just sheer curiosity over some rumor that they were reviving the couple. If his appropriation hadn't been about exhausted, Senthree would have told him where to go; but now was hardly the time, with a failure on one hand and a low credit balance on the other. He polished his new head quickly with the aid of one of the walls for a mirror and headed toward his office.

But Arpeten was smiling. He got to his feet as the bio-lab chief entered, holding out a well-polished hand. "Dr. Senthree. Delighted. And you've got an interesting place here. I've already seen most of it. And that pig—they tell me it's a descendant of a boar out of your test tubes."

"Incubation wombs. But you're right—the seventy-second generation."

"Fascinating." Arpeten must have been reading too much of that book *Proven Points to Popularity* they'd dug up in the ruins of Hudson ten years before, but it had worked. He was the Director. "But tell me. Just what good are pigs?"

Senthree grinned, in spite of himself. "Nobody knows. Men apparently kept a lot of them, but so far as I can see they are completely useless. They're clever, in a way. But I don't think they were pets. Just another mystery."

"Umm. Like men. Maybe you can tell me what good Man will be. I've been curious about that since I saw your appropriations. But nobody can answer."

"It's in the records," Senthree told him sharply. Then he modified his voice carefully. "How well do you know your history? I mean about the beginning."

"Well…"

He probably knew some of it, Senthree thought. They all got part of it as legends. He leaned back in his seat now, though, as the biochemist began the old tale of the beginning as they knew it. They knew that there had been Man a million years before them. And somebody—Asimov or Asenion, the record wasn't quite clear—had apparently created the first robot. They had improved it up to about the present level. Then there had been some kind of a contest in which violent forces had ruined the factories, most of the robots, and nearly all of the Men. It was believed from the fragmentary records that a biological weapon had killed the rest of man, leaving only the robots.

Those first robots, as they were now known, had had to start on a ruined world from scratch—a world where mines were exhausted, and factories were gone. They'd learned to get metals from the seas, and had spent years and centuries slowly rebuilding the machines to build new robots. There had been only two of them when the task was finished, and they had barely time enough to run one new robot off and educate him sketchily. Then they had discharged finally, and he had taken up rebuilding the race. It was almost like beginning with no history and no science. Twenty millennia had passed before they began to rebuild a civilization of their own.

"But why did Man die?" Senthree asked. "That's part of the question. And are we going to do the same? We know we are similar to Man. Did he change himself in some way that ruined him? Can we change ourselves safely? You know that there are a thousand ways we could improve ourselves. We could add anti gravity, and get rid of our cumbersome vehicles. We could add more arms. We could eliminate our useless mouths and talk by radio. We could add new circuits to our brains. But we don't dare. One school says that nobody can build a better race than itself, so Man must have been better than we are—and if he made us this way, there was a reason. Even if the psychologists can't understand some of the circuits in our brains, they don't dare touch them.

"We're expanding through the universe—but we can't even change ourselves to fit the new planets. And until we can find the reasons for Man's disappearance, that makes good sense. We know he was planning to change himself. We have bits of evidence. And he's dead. To make it worse, we have whole reels of education tape that probably contain all the answers—but information is keyed to Man's brain, and we can't respond to it. Give us a viable Man, and he can interpret that. Or we can find out by comparison what we can and cannot do. I maintain we can do a lot."

Arpeten shook his head doubtfully. "I suppose you think you know why he died!"

"I think so, yes. Instinct! That's a built-in reaction, an unlearned thought. Man had it. If a man heard a rattlesnake, he left the place in a hurry, even though he'd never heard it before. Response to that sound was built into him. No tape impressed it, and no experience was needed. We know the instincts of some of the animals, too—and one of them is to struggle and kill—like the ants who kill each other off. I think Man did just that. He couldn't get rid of his instincts when they were no longer needed, and they killed him. He should have changed—and we can change. But I can't tell that from animals. I need intelligent life, to see whether instinct or intelligence will dominate. And robots don't have instincts—I've looked for even one sign of something not learned individually, and can't find it. It's the one basic difference between us. Don't you see, Man is the whole key to our problem of whether we can change or not without risking extermination?"

"Umm." The director sounded noncommittal. "Interesting theory. But how are you going to know you have Man?"

Senthree stared at the robot with more respect. He tried to explain, but he had never been as sure of that himself as he might. Theoretically, they had bones and bits of preserved tissue. They had examined the gene pattern of these, having learned that the cells of the individual contain the same pattern as that of the zygote. And they had other guides—man's achievements, bits of his literature. From these, some working theories could be made. But he couldn't be quite sure—they'd never really known whether man's pigment was dark brown, pinkish orange, white, or what; the records they seemed to disagree on this.

"We'll know when we get an intelligent animal with instinct," he said at last. "It won't matter exactly whether he is completely like Man or not. At least it will give us a check on things we must know. Until then, we'll have to go on trying. You might as well know that the last experiment failed, though it was closer. But in another hundred years…"

"So." Arpeten's face became bland, but he avoided the look of Senthree. "I'm afraid not. At least for a while. That's what I came about, you know. We've just had word of several new planets around Arcturus, and it will take the major allocation of our funds to colonize these. New robots must be built, new ships—oh, you know. And we're retrenching a bit on other things. Of course, if you'd succeeded…but perhaps it's better you failed. You know how the sentiment against reviving Man has grown."

Senthree growled bitterly. He'd seen how it was carefully nurtured—though he had to admit it seemed to be easy to create. Apparently most of the robots were afraid of Man—felt he would again take over, or something. Superstitious fools.

"How much longer?" he asked.

"Oh, we won't cut back what you have, Dr. Senthree. But I'm afraid we simply can't allocate more funds. When this is finished, I was hoping to make you biological investigator, incidentally, on one of the planets. There'll be work enough…Well, it was a pleasure." He shook hands again, and walked out, his back a gleaming ramrod of efficiency and effectiveness.

Senthree turned back, his new body no longer moving easily. It could already feel the harsh sands and unknown chemical poisons of investigating a new planet—the futile, empty carding of new life that could have no real purpose to the robots. No more appropriations! And they had barely enough funds to meet the current bills.

Four hundred years—and a ship to Arcturus had ended it in three months. Instinct, he thought again—given life with intelligence and instinct together for one year, and he could settle half the problems of his race, perhaps. But robots could not have instincts. Fifty years of study had proven that.

Beswun threw up a hand in greeting as he returned, and he saw that the dissection was nearly complete, while the antique robot was activated. A hinge on its ludicrous jaw was moving, and rough, grating words were coming out. Senthree turned to the dissecting bench, and then swung back as he heard them.

"Wrong…wrong," it was muttering. "Can not live. Is not good brain. No pineal. Medulla good, but not good cerebrum. Fissures wrong. Maybe pituitary disfunction? No. How can be?" It probed doubtfully and set the brain aside. "Mutation maybe. Very bad. Need Milliken mike. See nucleus of cells. Maybe just freak, maybe new disease."

Senthree's fingers were taut and stiff as he fished into his bag and came out with a set of lenses. Beswun shook his head and made a waiting sign. He went out at a run, to come back shortly with a few bits of metal and the shavings from machining still on his hands. "Won't fit—but these adapters should do it. There, 324MD2991. Now come over here where you can look at it over this table—that's where the—uh, rays are."

He turned back, and Senthree saw that a fine wire ran from one adapter. "He doesn't speak our bio-terminology, Senthree. We'll have to see the same things he does. There—we can watch it on the screen. Now, 324MD2991, you tell us what is wrong and point it out. Are your hands steady enough for that?"

"Hands one-billionth inch accurate," the robot creaked; it was a meaningless noise, though they had found the unit of measure mentioned. But whatever it meant, the hands were steady enough. The microprobe began touching shadowy bunches of atoms, droning and grating. "Freak. Very bad freak. How he lived? Would stop tropoblast, not attach to uterus. Ketone—no ketone there. Not understand. How he live?"

Ceofor dashed for their chromosome blanks and began lettering in the complex symbols they used. For a second, Senthree hesitated. Then he caught fire and began making notes along with his assistant. It seemed to take hours; it probably did. The old robot had his memory intact, but there were no quick ways for him to communicate. And at last, the antique grunted in disgust and turned his back on them. Beswun pulled a switch.

"He expects to be discharged when not in use. Crazy, isn't it?" the physicist explained. "Look, boss, am I wrong, or isn't that close to what we did on the eleventh couple?"

"Only a few genes different in three chromosomes. We *were* close.

But—umm, that's ridiculous. Look at all the brain tissue he'd have—and a lot of it uncontrolled. And here—that would put an extra piece on where big and little intestines join—a perfect focal point for infection. It isn't efficient biological engineering. And yet—umm—most animals do have just that kind of engineering. I think the old robot was right—this would be Man!" He looked at their excited faces, and his shoulders sank. "But there isn't time. Not even time to make a zygote and see what it would look like. Our appropriations won't come through."

It should have been a bombshell, but he saw at once that they had already guessed it. Ceofor stood up slowly.

"We can take a look, boss. We've got the sperm from the male that failed—all we have to do is modify those three, instead of making up a whole cell. We might as well have some fun before we go out looking for sand fleas that secrete hydrofluoric acid and menace our colonies. Come on, even in your new body I'll beat you to a finished cell!"

Senthree grinned ruefully, but he moved toward the creation booth. His hands snapped on the little time field out of pure habit as he found a perfect cell. The little field would slow time almost to zero within its limits, and keep any damage from occurring while he worked. It made his own work difficult, since he had to force the probe against that, but it was insulated to some extent by other fields.

Then his hands took over. For a time he worked and thought, but the feeling of the protoplasm came into them, and his hands were almost one with the life stuff, sensing its tiny responses, inserting another link onto a chain, supplanting an atom of hydrogen with one of the hydroxyl radicals, wielding all the delicate chemical manipulation. He removed the defective genes and gently inserted the correct ones. Four hundred years of this work lay behind him—work he had loved, work which had meant the possible evolution of his race into all it might be.

It had become instinct to him—instinct in only a colloquial sense, however; this was learned response, and real instinct lay deeper than that, so deep that no reason could overcome it and that it was automatic even the first time. Only Man had had instinct and intelligence—stored somehow in this tiny cell that lay within the time field.

He stepped out, just as Ceofor was drawing back in a dead heat. But the younger robot inspected Senthree's cell, and nodded. "Less disturbance and a neater job on the nucleus—I can't see where you pierced the wall. Well, if we had thirty years—even twenty—we could have Man again—or a race. Yours is male and mine female. But there's no time…Shall I leave the time field on?"

Senthree started to nod.

Then he swung to Beswun. "The time field. Can it be reversed?"

"You mean to speed time up within it? No, not with that model. Take a bigger one. I could build you one in half an hour. But who'd want to speed up time with all the troubles you'd get? How much?"

"Ten thousand—or at least seven thousand times! The period is up tomorrow when disbursements have to be made. I want twenty years in a day."

Beswun shook his head. "No. That's what I was afraid of. Figure it this way: you speed things up ten thousand times and that means the molecules in there speed up just that much, literally. Now 273° times ten thousand—and you have more than two million degrees of temperature. And those molecules have energy! They come busting out of there. No, can't be done."

"How much can you do?" Senthree demanded.

Beswun considered. "Ten times—maybe no more than nine. That gives you all the refractories would handle, if we set it up down in the old pit under the building—you know, where they had the annealing oven."

It wasn't enough; it would still take two years. Senthree dropped onto a seat, vagrantly wondering again how this queer brain of his that the psychologists studied futilely could make him feel tired when his body could have no fatigue. It was probably one of those odd circuits they didn't dare touch.

"Of course, you can use four fields," Beswun stated slowly. "Big one outside, smaller one, still smaller, and smallest inside that. Fourth power of nine is about sixty-six hundred. That's close—raise that nine a little and you'd have your twenty years in a day. By the time it leaked from field to field, it wouldn't matter. Take a couple of hours."

"Not if you get your materials together and build each shell inside the other—you'll be operating faster each step then," Ceofor shouted. "Somebody'll have to go in and stay there a couple of our minutes toward the end to attach the educator tapes—and to revive the couple!"

"Take power," Beswun warned.

Senthree shrugged. Let it. If the funds they had wouldn't cover it, the Directorate would have to make it up, once it was used. Besides, once Man was created, they couldn't fold up the bio-labs. "I'll go in," he suggested.

"My job," Ceofor told him flatly. "You won the contest in putting the cells right."

Senthree gave in reluctantly, largely because the younger robot had more experience at reviving than he did. He watched Beswun assemble the complicated net of wires and become a blur as he seemed to toss the second net together almost instantly. The biochemist couldn't see the third go up—it was suddenly there, and Beswun was coming out as it flashed into existence. He held up four fingers, indicating all nets were working.

Ceofor dashed in with the precious cells for the prepared incubators that would nurture the bodies until maturity, when they would be ready for the educators. His body seemed to blur, jerk, and disappear. And almost at once he was back.

Senthree stood watching for a moment more, but there was nothing to see. He hesitated again, then turned and moved out of the building. Across the street lay his little lodging place, where he could relax with his precious two books—almost complete—that had once been printed by Man. Tonight he would study that strange bit of Man's history entitled *Gather, Darkness*, with its odd indications of a science that Man had once had which had surpassed even that of the robots now. It was pleasanter than the incomprehensibility of the mysteriously titled *Mein Kampf*. He'd let his power idle, and mull over it, and consider again the odd behavior of male and female who made such a complicated business of mating. That was probably more instinct—Man, it seemed, was filled with instincts.

For a long time, though, he sat quietly with the book on his lap, wondering what it would be like to have instincts. There must be many unpleasant things about it. But there were also suggestions that it could be pleasant. Well, he'd soon know by observation, even though he could never experience it. Man should have implanted one instinct in a robot's brain, at least, just to show what it was like.

He called the lab once, and Ceofor reported that all was doing nicely, and that both children were looking quite well. Outside the window, Senthree heard a group go by, discussing the latest bits of news on the Arcturus expedition. At least in that, Man had failed to equal the robots. He had somehow died before he could find the trick of using identity exchange to overcome the limitation imposed by the speed of light.

Finally he fell to making up a speech that he could deliver to the Director, Arpeten, when success was in his hands. It must be very short—something that would stick in the robot's mind for weeks, but carrying everything a scientist could feel on proving that those who opposed him were wrong. Let's see…

The buzzer on the telescreen cut through his thoughts, and he nipped it on to see Ceofor's face looking out. Senthree's spirits dropped abruptly as he stared at the younger robot "Failure? No!"

The other shook his head. "No. At least, I don't know. I couldn't give them full education. Maybe the tape was uncomfortable. They took a lot of it, but the male tore his helmet off and took the girl's off. Now they just sit there, rubbing their heads and staring around."

He paused, and the little darkened ridges of plastic over his eyes tensed. "The time speed-up is off. But I didn't know what to do."

"Let them alone until I get there. If it hurts them, we can give them the rest of it later. How are they otherwise?"

"I don't know. They look all right, boss." Ceofor hesitated, and his voice dropped. "Boss, I don't like it. there's something wrong here. I can't quite figure out what it is, but it isn't the way I expected. Hey, the male just pushed the female off her seat. Do you think their destructive instinct…? No, she's sitting down on the floor now, with her head against him, and holding one of his hands. Wasn't that part of the mating ritual in one of the books?"

Senthree started to agree, a bit of a smile coming onto his face. It looked as if instinct were already in operation.

But a strange voice cut him off. "Hey, you robots, when do we eat around here?"

They could talk! It must have been the male. And if it wasn't the polite thanks and gratitude Senthree had expected, that didn't matter. There had been all kinds of Men in the books, and some were polite while others were crude. Perhaps forced education from the tapes without fuller social experience was responsible for that. But it would all adjust in time.

He started to turn back to Ceofor, but the younger robot was no longer there, and the screen looked out on a blank wall. Senthree could hear the loud voice crying out again, rough and harsh, and there was a shrill, whining sound that might be the female. The two voices blended with the vague mutter of robot voices until he could not make out the words.

He wasted no time in trying. He was already rushing down to the street and heading toward the labs. Instinct—he male had already shown instinct, and the female had responded. They would have to be slow with the couple at first, of course—but the whole answer to the robot problems lay at hand. It would only take a little time and patience now. Let Arpeten sneer, and let the world dote on the Arcturus explorers. Today, biochemistry had been crowned king with the magic of intelligence combined with instinct as its power.

Ceofor came out of the lab at a run with another robot behind him.

The young robot looked dazed, and there was another emotion Senthree could not place. The older biochemist nodded, and the younger one waved quickly. "Can't stop now. They're hungry." He was gone at full speed.

Senthree realized suddenly that no adequate supply of fruit and vegetables had been provided, and he hadn't even known how often Man had to eat. Or exactly what. Luckily, Ceofor was taking care of that.

He went down the hall, hearing a tumult of voices, with robots apparently spread about on various kinds of hasty business. The main lab where the couple was seemed quiet. Senthree hesitated at the door, wondering how to address them. There must be no questioning now. Today he would not force himself on them, nor expect them to understand his purposes. He must welcome them and make them feel at ease in this world, so strange to them with their prehistoric tape education. It would be hard at first to adjust to a world of only robots, with no other Man people. The matter of instinct that had taken so long could wait a few days more.

The door dilated in front of him and he stepped into the lab, his eyes turning to the low table where they sat. They looked healthy, and there was no sign of misery or uncertainty that he could see, though he could not be sure of that until he knew them better. He could not even be sure it was a scowl on the male's face as the Man turned and looked at him.

"Another one, eh? Okay, come up here. Wha you want?"

Then Senthree no longer wondered how to address the Man, He bowed low as he approached them, and instinct made his voice soft and apologetic as he answered.

"Nothing, Master. Only to serve you."

The Fairy Godmother

This, Samantha told herself for the fiftieth time, was no way to treat a princess! No way at all! And she was a princess. Her father was a king; the kingdom might not be the largest—might even be the smallest. But he was still the king, and she was his only heir. Someday she'd be the reigning queen. You'd think they might show a little respect and consideration for a genuine royal princess who was twelve going on thirteen. But no, never that!

Her parents were off to some regional conference of kings. Surely she should be going along if she were ever to learn anything about governing a kingdom. Instead, she was being packed off to severe, grumpy old Aunt Hepzibah to spend a month in her mausoleum of a house.

She'd tried everything on her father—sweet requests, reason, even tears, but he wouldn't relent. Her mother had decided! Her mother always decided things the way she didn't want.

And where was her fairy godmother in all this? She was supposed to have one, though nobody told her anything beyond the fact that there was such a creature. The older servants just got a bemused expression when she questioned them. And her parents told her to wait until she was older—as they did about everything.

She'd tried to summon the stupid creature at least a dozen times, but nothing came of that. Nothing ever did. Some fairy godmother!

She stomped about her room, staring idly at the clothes scattered over her bed. She was supposed to pack them. But she would not touch the ugly things. They were hardly more than work clothes for peasants, for pity's sake, even if they had just been sewn by her mother's ladies. Ugh. Just because Aunt Hepzibah claimed *little girls* shouldn't primp, they should be learning to do some useful things—like working in Aunt Hepzibah's flower garden in place of the gardeners the old fuddy-duddy was too cheap to hire.

She heard clumping sounds from the stairs. That meant bossy old Wanda, her governess-maid when she was very young, was coming. Then the door banged open. The maid stopped just inside and stared about the room.

"Sammie, I thought I told you to get this stuff packed. We don't have all day to waste mooning around!"

"Don't call me that ugly name," Samantha screamed at her. "My name's Samantha. And you're supposed to call me Highness."

It did no good. It never did. Wanda muttered to herself, then began lugging out a bag for clothing from the closet. "You just go sit in that chair and stay out of my way, Sammie. We're supposed to be downstairs waiting in ten minutes."

Watching Wanda pack, she had to admit that the old maid was better at some things than her new one—now preempted for the journey by her mother after the queen's regular maid got sick. It didn't really matter, though. Aunt Hepzibah would never let her bring a maid.

She moved over to the window, pulled back the drapes, and looked down at the carriage driveway. "The carriage isn't even here yet," she observed.

"Don't you worry, it'll be there by the time you're ready for it," Wanda said, closing the bag on the last ugly dress. "Well, let's get moving, Sammie." She picked up the bag and followed Samantha.

She saw her mother and father waiting in the entrance lobby, and went up to give her mother the expected kiss. But the queen pulled away. "Don't rumple me, Samantha," she said, and kissed her daughter on the forehead carefully. "Have a nice time while we're gone, dear."

A nice time indeed! Little her mother cared. Sometimes she thought Aunt Hepzibah had been right about one thing, at least. She'd quizzed Samantha on her parents' doings, then had shaken her head. "Seems to me your mother's getting biggety notions, forgetting she was just a rich commoner's daughter till your father saw her at a flower show and decided to marry her. Wants people to think she's more than she is!"

But her father was there, taking the bag from Wanda in one hand and holding the other out to her. "Come on, Sammie—Samantha. Can't keep the horses standing."

Then they were at the door, and she could see her "carriage." "Oh, no!" she gasped, not quite believing it. It was the old carriage from which they'd torn the top, used by the cook to go food shopping. And drunken Old John was driving.

"I'm sorry, Sam—mantha. But it's all we have. The second carriage's wheel still isn't fixed, and the third's being taken by your mother's maid and hairdresser. This was the best I could do."

It wasn't his fault, she knew. "It's all right, Daddy," she lied as he lifted her to be kissed, then put her down in the worn old seat. She could see worry on his face and she tried to smile.

"Be good, punkin," he told her. "I'll send a good carriage for you as soon as I can get back."

"You folks done back there?" Old John grumbled. "Come on, giddyap!"

And they were off, with the two horses still fresh and prancing a bit. They were better than Old John usually drove, and he was having some trouble controlling them.

They swung out of the driveway of the big old house people insisted on calling the palace onto the main road, still fairly smooth and showing where local labor had filled in the worst of the winter damage. Old John seemed to get better control and gentled the horses down to a pace the ill-sprung carriage could handle. The miles sped by, while Old John retrieved a bottle from under the seat and relieved the dryness in his throat. His throat was always dry.

There was almost no other traffic, thank the good God! Samantha huddled down in the back beside the bag, trying to hide from anyone they might meet. But she began to get aches and cramps from her position and was finally forced to sit up.

The thinned and cared-for woods around the palace was falling behind, and she was now looking at woods that seemed wild. When she was younger, the maids had told her shiveringly delicious tales of things that dwelled in such forest: wolves that swallowed children at a gulp, witches, goblins, and bogeys. Somehow, the tales seemed more real now as she gazed at the darkness in the tangles under the great trees. The ditch beside the road was dry now, long past the spring melt-off, and mats of weeds and bushes were growing in it.

Beyond the forest lay Aunt Hepzibah with lectures and back-breaking work in the garden or sweltering tasks in her steamy kitchen, then more lectures and rewards in the form of little books that held morals thick enough to break one's teeth on. Thinking of that, she wished the forest might go on forever.

Old John was looking more alert now, putting the bottle back under the seat. He seemed to be trying to stare ahead around each turn of the road, though there was nothing to see.

Then suddenly there was a shout and two men broke from cover beside the road, riding hard toward them and brandishing huge pistols. "Hold or we fire!" the older one yelled. John stood up, sawing at the reins to stop the horses. But the younger man raised his pistol. There was a shot, and the off-horse jumped against the harness. One ear was nothing but a bleeding stump.

Both horses were panicking, trying to go in separate directions. The carriage skidded, swung to the ditch, and began to turn over. Samantha grabbed for a railing, but there was no time. The carriage bounced, turned, and was on its side in the ditch, spilling her out and beyond, almost through a clump of brush on the farther bank. She pawed her way free and scrambled behind its little shelter.

The horses lay in the ditch on their sides, tangled in harness and the tongue of the carriage, pawing hopelessly and screaming horribly. And Old John—She wanted to throw up as she saw where his head lay against a rock, with blood and brains oozing from it. But she controlled herself, looking desperately for better shelter. There was none.

"Damn, Peter, I told you not to fire that thing!" the older bandit was saying as the two men dismounted. "Cut the throats of those beasts and shut them up. Where's Old John? Never mind, I see him. Dead."

"Better for us. One less to split with," the young man answered, busy with the screaming horses. A few minutes later they quieted. "Where's the girl? She all right?"

"Damned if I know. I was looking right at her, but she just seemed to disappear."

"Must be covered by all that clothing that spilled out. Hey, that stuff don't look much like what a princess would have!"

"Stuff a maid might wear—but it's all like this. She looked to be dressed in the same stuff. Maybe Old John got it wrong. Maybe it was only the maid of the princess he was supposed to take. Old fool was half drunk, last we talked to him. A fat lot of money we'll get for a maid's ransom! But where'd she go? She's sure not in the wreck or this stuff."

He was looking right at her, too. Even in the shadow of a tree, she couldn't be concealed by the thin stalks of the bush. Maybe her fairy godmother? But that didn't make sense, either. It would take a pretty stupid fairy godmother to wait until after she was in such a situation before doing something!

"Let's get the hell outta here." The younger bandit was looking at the road nervously. "Let the maid go. She'll be too scared to describe us. And there's gonna be others coming along this highway."

"Yeah. I suppose you're right," the older man agreed. He pulled himself up reluctantly. "Damn! I just wish I knew how she got away. All right, though. Let's go!"

A minute later, they were mounted and galloping off.

Samantha stood there, staring at the retreating horsemen until they rode out of sight around a bend in the road. Her ugly dress was dirty and torn, but when she looked at the others that had spilled from the bag, they were worse—filthy from being walked over by the rough boots of the highwaymen. She sighed and retreated behind the big tree, trying to consider what she must do.

She'd have to walk—either to Aunt Hepzibah's or back to the palace. She guessed that they'd come about halfway between. The idea of confronting her aunt with her appearance and tale was too much. It would have to be home to the palace. And she couldn't go along the road; the bandits might decide to ride back along it and would see her. That left the forest.

Well, the road went about north and south, despite the curves it made. So, if she went a ways into the forest and headed north, she'd come to the well-kept woods around the palace and then could easily find her way home. She stared at the dark, forbidding forest, feeling panic begin to take her. But she forced it away and set off.

From the distance, the underbrush had seemed impenetrable, but as she got closer she began to see openings and spaces where she could go. Moving through it, she found she could make fairly good time, though she began to accumulate small scratches on her arms. Most of the time, the big trees cut off all sight of the sun, but she'd heard a forester once explain how he kept on his way by moonlight—he just set his sight on the farthest big tree he could see in the right direction and headed for that, sighting along it for another farther on as he went. Occasional glimpses of the sun indicated to Samantha that his method seemed to be working.

She began to get hungry and thirsty, but there was nothing she could do about that. She decided after much thought that she should probably reach her home sometime tomorrow afternoon, and she'd just have to endure until then. Her shoes began to hurt her feet. When she took them off, she found blisters on her heels. Going barefoot didn't work; stones and brambles soon showed her she needed the shoes. She should have taken another pair of socks from the spilled bag. Wearing two pairs would have eased the chafing. But it was too late for second thoughts now.

She found a tiny brooklet eventually and was able to assuage her thirst. She rested there for perhaps fifteen minutes, trying to wash some of the filth from her hands, face, and dress. Then she drank again and went reluctantly on.

Dark clouds were gathering in the sky; before the daylight faded, rain began falling, gently at first. It was rapidly growing dark now, and she could go no farther. She began looking for shelter for the night as the rain became heavier. Caves and hollow trees abounded in the old tales, but she could find none. She finally found a place she might use under a massive old oak. Against its trunk, conditions were not too miserable. She cleared away the sticks and stones as best she could, lay down, and pulled a leaf-covered bough she'd found over her for concealment and further protection from the rain. By that time, she was so tired that she was shivering all over.

Sleep wouldn't come. There were strange sounds in the forest: owls hooted like forlorn ghosts; things scuttled through the underbrush; and once she heard laughter, which was probably the barking of a fox. She started at each for a time, but eventually exhaustion won, though she came awake several times to the memory of something near and disturbing.

It was morning when she finally woke, not really rested, but aware that she had to go on. Rain was still falling, though gently now, and the sky was still overcast. Her hunger was a sick ache inside her, but there were rain pools from which she quenched her thirst. Her legs were stiff and sore and her body seemed a mass of anguish from the hard, lumpy bed. But she started off, trying to establish her previous direction. Visibility was limited, and she was forced to fix her sights at less distance than she liked.

She limped along. The blisters broke, changing the nature of her pain, and her legs began to feel numb. But she stubbornly refused to give up, sit down, and cry—as she wanted to.

Eventually, she came on a small clearing where wild strawberries grew—what the peasants called earth-berries. They were deliciously sweet and aromatic, and she ate all she could find—though that was hardly enough.

As she started to leave, the clouds broke apart, and she was able to see the sky—and her shadow, pointing away from her and shortened, as it was at noon. She groaned when she saw the way it pointed.

She'd been heading almost due east, not north at all! The entire morning had been wasted, taking her farther away from her home.

Again, she forced back her tears. She had no time for them. She saw that the sky was clearing and that she'd be able to pick proper sighting targets—and perhaps even get an occasional glimpse of the sun. Carefully, she positioned herself by the shadow she cast, sighted on a big tree far ahead, and started out again, heading northwest. If she overshot her goal, she'd still come out in familiar territory—she hoped.

By nightfall, she could hardly move. She'd found water during the day, but nothing that she dared eat, and hunger was making her weak. She seemed to have a million aches and scratches.

She took the first place that offered a chance to bed down, scraped away the worst of the stones and twigs, and simply flopped down, not even taking off her worn-out shoes. This time, she was asleep almost at once.

Something wakened her, probably around midnight, judging by the direction of light from the nearly full moon. She sat up tensely, listening. There was a faint rustling from the brush at her left, then something broke through. It looked like a tiny, brown man with a snarling, bestial face.

He stepped farther into the clearing, stared about without apparently seeing her, then lifted his head and sniffed loudly, testing the faint wind for odors. Evidently, he was satisfied. Samantha waited to be discovered, girding herself to leap to her feet and run. But he seemed not to see her, though he glanced right and left as he passed within twenty feet of her. He crossed the clearing and disappeared into the underbrush.

She waited tensely until she could be sure he was really gone. Finally, she let herself feel safe again.

It was a fox, distorted by her imagination, she tried to tell herself. It had to be a fox! But she didn't believe it.

She moved to a somewhat more hidden spot before trying to sleep again. She was stiff and sore from the earlier place, in addition to all the aches from before that. But sleep finally overcame her again.

In the morning, she could barely move for the first half hour or so until the exercise gradually loosened her muscles. But she forced herself on. Unless she had gone totally wrong, she should reach home before another night. At least, she prayed she would. She found water, but no food, though she seemed to be growing weaker and feeling sicker from hunger.

After a couple more hours, she came to another clearing. And there, surrounded by a stone wall with a stile, was a house, also built of stone, and a garden!

She clambered clumsily over the stile. She meant to go and knock on the door of the house, but the sight of the tops of carrots in the garden drew her eyes. If she could just get a few baby carrots to eat…

A window in the house opened, and a woman's voice came out, commanding. "You! Little girl! You stay right there until I can come out. Don't you take another step!"

The woman who came from the back of the house seemed to be about forty-five, gray-haired, short, and a bit stout. She was dressed in simple working woman's garments, and there was a touch of anger on her face.

Then that vanished as she drew nearer and got a good look at Samantha. "Oh, you poor child. Whatever happened to you?"

Samantha had been putting together her story since she first heard the woman. It would never do to admit who she was. Her ransom would probably be large enough to make even fairly honest people consider holding her.

"I'm lost. My mother and father—they left," she answered, giving the truth, but also a euphemism for death that was so common among the poorer classes. "I was supposed to be sent to my aunt. But when I got there, she'd moved. Nobody knew where and nobody there wanted me to stay. They told me to go to the King's Hospice for Orphans. So I left. Then I got lost in the forest—two days and two nights. It was horrible!"

The shudder she gave was real, as were the tears in her eyes. The woman patted Samantha's shoulder sympathetically. "Poor child, indeed. You have anything to eat?"

"I found a few earth-berries yesterday."

"You must be starving. Well, you just come along with me. We'll find you something to eat and see about a good hot bath. That will make you feel better, I'll warrant." She took Samantha's arm and led the way toward the back of the house. "What do people call you, child?"

"My name is Samantha."

"The things people afflict their children with. Why'd they call you that?"

"It was the name of my mother's mother," Samantha said truthfully.

"All right, then. I'll bet people call you Sammie, which is what I'll do, if you don't mind. And you call me Bessy."

Samantha shook her head. She was in no position to object. "But I'm not supposed to use first names to older people." Except servants, she carefully did not add.

"Got some manners, then. All right, call me Aunt Bessy. The lord's children did, before he died and we came here."

They were entering the back door then, and an older man was extending a work-toughened hand with arthritis-swollen knuckles.

"This is my husband Jonathan," Aunt Bessy introduced him. "I think he'll be happy if you call him Uncle Jon, Sammie. And this is Samantha, Jonathan."

He bowed and smiled. Then Samantha followed them to the kitchen and was seated at the table. Uncle Jon, apparently well-versed in what his wife would want, brought in a bucket of water and filled a large kettle, then shoved it on its hook over the fire in the fireplace. He added wood, before dragging in an old wooden bathtub. Then he left quietly.

"We had breakfast hours ago," Aunt Bessy said. "But I think maybe a couple eggs, a little of that bacon slab, some of the bread I baked yesterday, and maybe coffee. You allowed coffee, Sammie?"

She nodded. She'd had coffee since she was ten. Her mouth was already salivating. And in less time than she'd thought possible, she was eating real food, taking the first few bites slowly, as Aunt Bessy warned her she must, with the warmth of coffee spreading through her body. And the hot bath that soaked away her aches and muscle fatigue was heavenly.

"Not much I can do with what's left of this dress, I'm afraid," Aunt Bessy decided. "Got rips all over, and the dirt's ground in. Pity you ain't a boy. Umm, still, you're about the same size. You mind wearing some boy's clothes, Sammie?"

"I don't know. I never tried before."

"Well, let's try now. Be months before the cloth-seller gets around to here, and I used up the last lot on the curtains. You wrap that towel around you and come upstairs with me."

Upstairs was a general storage area directly under the roof and a low-ceilinged bedroom in the back, with a single window. Aunt Bessy went to a chest on one wall and began dragging out some clean and neatly folded boy's clothes. She held them up against Samantha and nodded.

"They were Billy's—our son and only child. He was ten and large for his age when he died. Diphtheria. He caught it from a playmate who also died from it. We buried him in his favorite spot, out behind the old elm tree he was always climbing. If you look out you can see where we buried him beneath the tree. Still upsets Jonathan a mite, though I've learned to accept it mostly. Now, you just set yourself down on the bed and let me look at those feet of yours."

With much head-shaking and tongue-clicking, the inspection was soon made. Aunt Bessy spread a thick ointment from a jar she brought out of her apron pocket, then very gently drew on some boy's thick socks over Samantha's feet. "That should feel better in a little while. I think Billy's shoes are going to be a little wide in the toes, but they should do. But not today. Those feet are too sore for that. Maybe Jonathan can do something about your shoes. He's clever about such things."

It took some instruction before Samantha was fully dressed as a boy, but the clothes really fitted better than had the ugly dress. It felt odd at first, but she soon began to feel normal.

"Maybe I should have been a boy," she said. "I'm flat enough up here." She put one hand on her chest.

"Don't you worry about them," Aunt Bessy assured her. "They'll come in due time. And something else not so pleasant."

"I know about that. I—someone explained it all to me." She had almost slipped by mentioning her governess. Better be careful.

Moving about and getting used to the different clothes, Samantha went to the little back window and looked out. Most of the area below was the garden. The outhouse was near the back, and the hand-pumped well was a bit up the hill and away, where the water would be clear and uncontaminated. She saw the old elm in a corner at the back, with a little fence around it.

"Never put up a monument," Aunt Bessy told her. "He carved his name on the tree when he was nine with his birthday knife. We figured that was monument enough."

Then she drew back from the window and indicated the bed. "Maybe you better lie down till I call you for supper, Sammie. There's nothing much to do, and a bit of real rest will do wonders for you. Sleep in your clothes till I can cut down one of my nightshirts. All right?"

"It sounds wonderful, Aunt Bessy."

And it was wonderful. The sheet was clean and there were no lumps in the thick straw-filled mattress on the bed. She woke hours later, feeling better and more cheerful than she had felt since she learned she was supposed to spend the best part of the spring and summer with old Aunt Hepzibah.

Aunt Bessy called her and she went downstairs in her stocking feet to the kitchen, where supper was plain but very good. Once the dishes were washed and put away, they all went into the parlor, furnished with homemade but comfortable furniture. Aunt Bessy had her sewing with her and began on that. Uncle Jon, who seldom said much, just sat.

"Did you always live here?" Samantha asked.

"No. I was born in a hut about a mile north; it's gone now, and good riddance. But Jonathan was the son of the lord's blacksmith-carpenter. First we met, we were both in service."

It seemed that Aunt Bessy had gone, seeking employment to the lord, when she was fourteen. There the housekeeper took a fancy to her. She was put in the kitchen, but one hour each day the old lady spent teaching her to use the language properly and how to serve. She graduated to chambermaid, then to parlor maid. It was there Uncle Jon met her. He was second butler by then, far above her, but he knew what he wanted when he saw it. When another maid had to leave, she was put in charge of the young children of the lord, who seemed to love her—and Uncle Jon, when he came to visit her. In time, the lord let them marry.

Samantha gathered that the lord was a kind and thoughtful master, quite unlike so many Samantha had heard about. When he was killed in a hunting accident, it was found that he'd left a small income for the two to live on as long as either lived.

"I remembered this place," Aunt Bessy said. "As a child, I'd seen it and dreamed of it ever since. So Jonathan and I came back here. The old couple who'd had the place were dead, and it was empty. The new lord gave it to us for a small rental, and we've been here eighteen years now. I reckon we'll die here."

By then, Uncle Jon had put a chessboard on the small table and was setting up the pieces. "You play chess, Samantha?" he asked. At her nod, he beamed. "Black or white? White of course, so you move first."

She shifted her chair to the table and began by moving king's pawn to king four. And the game was under way. She'd always been good at chess, but she had to extend herself now. The endgame almost defeated her. But at last, she called, "Checkmate!"

He nodded and rose to put the board and set away. "You play very well, Samantha," he said. "Thank you. First game I've had in years."

By then, it was bedtime, and Samantha took the cut-down nightdress Aunt Bessy had been working on and climbed to her little room. She could hardly keep her eyes open by the time she'd undressed and put on the nightgown. The bed felt wonderful.

The next day was general cleaning day, it seemed. The house that looked spotless to Samantha had to be gone over completely, and the wash was boiled clean in the kitchen and rinsed out under the pump, which Samantha found not too hard to operate. They hung the clothes on the lines together where the sun would bleach and dry them.

And then it was baking and cooking time. A meat wagon drove up in the morning, and Aunt Bessy carried on a long-established banter with the driver as she made her selections. Meat came once a week and wouldn't keep, so it had to be cooked before it was taken to the cold-cellar under the house.

The day following was gardening, and there Samantha could be of real help, once Aunt Bessy was sure she knew a weed when she saw it and how to use a hoe without slicing the good plants. It wasn't too different from tending old Aunt Hepzibah's flowers—but a lot more pleasant.

And every night there was a game or two with Uncle Jon, who seemed to win about twice to her once.

She seemed to lose track of the days. But finally, she had to consider what she must do. There'd been no mention of her leaving. But she couldn't go on forever. Sooner or later, her old world would catch up with her. She didn't think anyone would report the wrecked carriage. It had been pretty well shattered in turning over. Predators would soon reduce the horses and Old John to bone, and most of what was left would vanish in the muddy flood from the rains that would wash down the ditch. Nobody looked very closely at wrecks in the ditch along the highway.

She wondered what would have happened if she'd told Aunt Bessy the truth at once. The reason for her lie had been a mistake, she knew now. But confessing her lie was going to be hard. Still, she had to make a clean breast of it sooner or later, and sooner was better.

Two more days. Just give me two more, she begged her fairy godmother. Not that the creature would care, if there really was one.

After she told the truth, what would happen? They'd forgive her, she was sure. But how would they get news to the palace? They had no horse, and neither of them could make the journey to the palace with her. But somehow, they'd find a way. She was sure of that.

Next day was gardening again. She and Aunt Bessy finished the rows of carrots, turnips, and young cabbages before noon. They stopped to rest at the end of the row, letting the pleasant fatigue drain from their arms and backs.

Samantha saw that her hoe was beginning to accumulate dirt. She bent down to clean it with a small stick and saw something bright-colored there. She bent closer.

"No, Sammie, NO!" Aunt Bessy suddenly screamed. The older woman's arm came down to snatch Samantha's hand back.

Something moved suddenly, striking upward. It was a snake, and its fangs were buried in Aunt Bessy's hand! Samantha struck at it with her hoe, but it wouldn't come loose. Both she and Aunt Bessy were screaming.

Then Uncle Jon was there, moving faster than seemed possible for him. He cut the head from the body with a single stroke of a sickle and began prying the stubborn mouth open. It fell free at last, and he ground it under his heel.

Aunt Bessy seemed near fainting from shock, and Samantha and Uncle Jon had to help her back to the house. There Uncle Jon put her in a chair and gently began cutting a cross across the bites to let the blood flow out. Then he began making some kind of a poultice to place on the wound, using the hottest water she could stand.

"We better take her to our room and put her to bed," he told Samantha. "Best that she doesn't move around much with that in her.'

Samantha was crying. "It was all my fault," she wailed. "I was reaching for it, and she tried to save me."

"Enough of that!" Uncle Jon broke in sternly. "It's nobody's fault that you didn't know about such snakes. Now be quiet and help me get her to bed."

All that day they watched over her, changing the poultice frequently. Uncle Jon made a broth which he fed her. She seemed to sleep for several hours, then began tossing about. Her whole arm was swollen and red and felt hot to Samantha's touch. She quieted after a while. The poison slowly spread, and her arm swelled until it seemed three times normal. By evening, Uncle Jon had to tie her down to keep her from tossing herself from the bed.

All night they watched together over her. Samantha sometimes found herself sleeping in the chair, but it wasn't restful sleep.

In the early morning hours, Uncle Jon sighed heavily and stood up. "It's no good, Samantha. Without more help than we can give, she'll die tomorrow." The bones of his face stood out against the clenched muscles, and he looked years older.

"I guessed that," Samantha whispered.

"Soon as it's light enough to follow the path, I'm going to Edona for the doctor. Not that he'll do much for her, maybe, but we have to try."

"Not you. Me," Samantha told him. "I can run a lot faster than you can. Tell me how to reach the doctor, and I'll go."

He stared at her, then nodded reluctantly, accepting the logic of her words. When the first hint of dawn was breaking, he took her out the back door and pointed out the path to her. "It goes on for several miles before it forks. Take the right fork. That will bring you to the village, and anyone can tell you how to find the doctor. Godspeed and God bless you, Samantha!"

She knew she couldn't run that far, even in boy's clothes. She ran for a little ways, then walked, and ran again. It seemed to take forever—and probably did take more than an hour—before she reached the fork. The early sun was already well above the horizon.

There was a man in a black cloak with a black hood pulled low over his face sitting on a rock by the crossroads. She started to run past him, but he reached out with a dark walking stick and stopped her.

"What are you running from in such a hurry, youngster? Trying to run away from your master?"

"I'm not running from anyone," she snapped at him with what breath she had left. "I'm running to the doctor to fetch him for Aunt Bessy."

"Commendable, if true. And since my ears tell me you're a girl, what's wrong with her, young lady?"

"It's none of your business, but if you must know, a snake bit her," she answered. "And her arm's all swollen to the shoulder and she's stopped tossing around and just lies gasping. Now let me go!"

"And what's your stake in all this?" the man asked. It began to sound like a ritual. "Do you lose your good home when she dies?"

"No such thing. I've got to leave soon, anyhow. But she's been awfully good to me, and I think, if she dies, Uncle Jon won't live much beyond her. They're not my real aunt and uncle, but I—I guess I love them. Now can I go?"

The dark man stood up, taking the stick away. "Certainly. But you won't find the doctor—he's out on another call. And from what you say of your aunt's condition, you don't need a doctor of physic. You need a doctor of metaphysics."

The part about the doctor fitted her own suspicion. But she'd never heard of the other calling. "Where can I find one?"

"As it happens, young lady, you're very fortunate today. I happen to be an excellent practitioner of that art. At your service, my dear."

He bowed gracefully to her, then took her hand. "We must hurry," he said. He didn't really seem to hurry, and she had no trouble keeping pace with him back toward Aunt Bessy's home. But the land around seemed to swim past at an alarming rate.

Then she glanced back and saw the sun setting—in the east! "What—what's happening?"

"Just a bit of applied metaphysics, my dear. Don't worry if strange things happen. You might say that the clock has been turned backward for us."

They went on along the path while the stars appeared and began hurrying eastward. Soon the sun was rising from the west and flying eastward through the sky. In almost no time, it had passed its noonday position, and they were standing before the stile over the wall to the garden.

"We couldn't have helped today, so this had to be yesterday," the dark man told her. "Don't worry about it. It will be today for you. Don't be surprised or panic at anything that I tell you to do. And don't ever mention it to anybody. Will you promise that to me?"

She nodded, and he went on. "Now you climb up on the stile. You'll see your Aunt Bessy in the garden, looking fine. Don't be surprised. And there'll be a child beside her. Don't look too closely at her. I'm going to stay here, but when I snap my fingers, I want you to run and grab the hoe from the other girl's hand. Can you remember that?"

"I guess so. Then what do I do?"

"Just do what you think you should. Now..." His fingers snapped.

She jumped from the stile and grabbed the hoe, to seize it from the other girl's grasp. But there was no resistance. There no longer was another girl. The hoe was in her hand and she was looking down at something bright-colored on the ground.

"Aunt Bessy, there's a snake," she said.

The older woman glanced down and pulled Samantha back, yelling for Jonathan. He took one look and ran back to the toolshed. In no time, the snake lay writhing on the ground in six pieces.

Samantha looked around for the dark man, but he was gone, not even waiting to present his bill. And everything looked normal, as if all the trouble had never happened. Uncle Jon showed no sign of strain, and there was nothing wrong with Aunt Bessy.

Magic! It had to be some kind of magic. She'd promised that she would never speak of it to anyone. But if she ever saw the dark man again—which seemed more unlikely than meeting him once—she'd try to tell him just how grateful she was to him.

They went back to the garden after lunch. Uncle Jon got rid of the pieces of the snake and searched thoroughly to be sure there were no others. Soon everything felt normal again, and she was almost able to forget what had happened.

But as she lay down that night on her bed, she determined that she'd tell them the truth about herself tomorrow at breakfast. It would be hard, but she couldn't keep putting it off any longer.

It didn't quite happen that way, however.

Aunt Bessy broke in on her before she was fully dressed in the morning. "Sammie, he's here! The king is here. And he's looking for you! He says you're his daughter, the princess!"

"I am," Samantha admitted guiltily.

It didn't make sense. He couldn't be back from the conference yet. And how could he ever have heard that she was in this place, even if he did get back early?

"And here I've been treating you like any little girl—like my own daughter, for heaven's sake," Aunt Bessy was saying. "Forgive me, your Highness, please. And don't blame Jonathan."

"Please. Please, Aunt Bessy." She finished putting her shoes on and stood up to kiss the worried face before her. "I want you to keep right on treating me that way. Please. You've made me very happy. I'd be hurt if you didn't. And I guess I should be apologizing for lying to you at first."

"Pooh. We've been happy with you here, Jonathan and I. And if it took a little lie for that to be, then bless the lie. You're a very special girl, Sammie. And we're going to miss you."

When they descended the stairs, her father was sitting at the old kitchen table, explaining something to Jonathan as he finished a syrup covered pile of pancakes. He leaped to his feet as he saw her.

"Sammie!" He gathered her to him, then pushed her back for a good look at her. "It's good to see you again. You had us all worried sick! We were beginning to lose hope for you."

"How'd you get here, Daddy? And what happened to the conference?"

"Bother the conference! We were just leaving the halfway inn for the second day's journey when the messenger arrived from the palace. One of my men, riding on an errand I'd left for him, spotted the wreck and recognized what was left of the carriage and the body of Old John. He knew you were supposed to leave to visit your aunt. He made a hasty search, but saw no sign of you. So he reported back to the palace. Further search still found no trace of you. So everyone decided you'd been seized by highwaymen for ransom."

"Two bandits planned to do that," Samantha interrupted. "Old John told them about it for a part of the ransom."

"So we discovered," the king said. "They sent word to us and continued the search. The minute your mother heard it, she sent one of the footmen on a horse of the landlord's to cancel our attendance."

"Mother did that?"

"She certainly did. One daughter is worth fifty of such conferences."

By the time they got back to the palace, some smart work by the head of security had already captured the bandits, who confessed "under rigorous questioning." The king had them hanged, of course, and sent out men with her description to all parts of the kingdom. But, despite two false leads, they could find no trace of her.

"Then late last night, a man in black with a hood came to the back door of the palace and claimed to know where you were. He even had a map of how to reach the place. But by the time I got there he couldn't be found. That seemed odd, since there was a reward, but I decided to leave for here as soon as I could, anyway. And here I am. I brought along some of your nice clothes, chosen by your mother. As soon as you change, we'll leave. Your mother's very worried about you."

She took the clothes when the footman brought them in and went back upstairs to change. They felt odd now and not nearly as easy to wear as the boy's had been. But she paid little attention to that.

The dark man again! Who and what was he, anyhow? Suspicion lay in the back of her mind, but she couldn't really accept it. She'd never even told him who she was. It couldn't possibly be him. But how could anyone else know she was here?

She went downstairs again, almost tripping on the stairs in her dress. There she ran forward to kiss and hug the two people who had given her shelter and treated her like their own child. She'd miss them terribly. They were crying—even Uncle Jon—and she felt her own tears start.

The king smiled at them. "I don't think you need be that gloomy," he told them all. "You're not going to lose her for good, I promise. We usually give her two weeks vacation in the fall and a month in the spring. She usually goes to stay with an old harridan of an aunt, and she hates it. That's going to stop. Suppose I just send her here instead. Would you like that, Sammi—Samantha?"

"Oh, Daddy. More than anything! But what about Mother?"

"I think right now is a good time to propose it to her. And she's going to agree, I promise you that. From what I've seen, this has been the best thing that ever happened, and I want it to continue. How about you, Bessy, Jonathan? Will you have her?"

"God bless your Majesty," Aunt Bessy said, bowing to him, with Jonathan joining in the bow.

"Then it's all fixed. And as I told you before, none of that formal fol-de-rol. You're both in the family now, you know."

Samantha watched them through the little back window of the carriage—the best carriage, this time! They stood together outside the front door, waving to her. Then the narrow, rutted road swung behind the trees and she slid back to the seat beside her father.

"I think we're going to have to start treating you a bit differently from now on, Sam—mantha," her father said. "Anyone who can keep going for two days with no proper clothes and no provisions through that part of the forest isn't a child anymore. My best forester swore you couldn't last for a day in there."

"Different how?" she asked. She wasn't quite sure she was ready for another change just yet. Going to visit Aunt Bessy and Uncle Jon instead of her other aunt seemed glorious enough a change for one day.

"I think we'll have to start teaching you how to govern a kingdom. You're going to be queen someday, and you'd better learn how. Sometimes it's pretty dull, but it's important. And boys. We should be taking you with us when we visit other kings or our nobles, to meet some of the other youngsters—girls and boys. Some day you'll be taking on a consort, and you'd better know enough to pick a good one."

It all sounded interesting, if a bit scary. But her mind was on other things.

"Daddy, am I old enough to know about my fairy godmother? And do I really have one?"

"Indeed you do. She's been in the family for at least seven generations, maybe more. She always shows up at the christening of any possible heir to the throne."

"Did you ever really see her? And what's she like?"

They were on a side road now, but much better than the way to the little stone house with the garden. He leaned back and seemed to think.

"I saw her only once, at your christening. Just after the ceremony was finished, there she was. Nobody knew how she got there, but she was right beside you. I always figured she must be a withered old hag after so many years, but she looked young and beautiful. Long golden hair, braided and coiled into a corona around her head. Some kind of a fancy deep blue dress. There was a kind of glow over her as she touched you on the forehead and pronounced your gifts."

The description certainly couldn't be that of the dark man, no matter what the disguise. But the little suspicion still remained.

Then she realized fully what she'd heard. "Gifts? What sort of gifts, Daddy?"

"Odd ones. They always were. Umm, one was the gift of necessitous imperceptibility. The other was the gift of nonindulgent summoning. You know what they mean?"

"I can figure them out, Daddy. Not being seen when it's absolutely necessary and calling something or someone up when it isn't just being self-indulgent."

He nodded. She thought over past events, seeing explanations for what had bothered her before. The gifts explained why the bandits and the tiny, brown man—or whatever it was—hadn't been able to see her. And could she really have summoned the dark man when her need hadn't been selfish or petty? It seemed to fit.

"And what happened then?"

"She just vanished. Not with any cloud of fire or smoke, as the old tales tell it. And she didn't fly away. She just spread her wings and wasn't there."

"Wings?"

"Oh, yes. She had wings, something like those of a butterfly, growing from her shoulder blades. They seemed iridescent, changing colors as she moved. Beautiful."

And with that, Samantha's suspicion collapsed completely. There were no wings under the black cloak of the dark man—no room for even folded wings.

They were drawing near the main road now, and she glanced at the forest to her right. It looked as forbidding as ever, she decided. Then, a little ahead of them, something stirred on the shoulder of the road. She stared harder, frowning. It was the dark man! She started to call her father's attention to him, but he put his finger to where his lips should be, shaking his head.

Then, as she watched in startled silence, he began to loosen the cloak about him. It folded back, and the hood opened and fell away. There was a head of golden hair coiled into a corona and a mesmerizingly beautiful face. She was still wearing the blue dress. And the folded cloak was turning to a pair of iridescent wings. She smiled, still with her finger to her lips, and made the motion of blowing a kiss toward Samantha.

Then she wasn't there anymore.

Samantha sat back on the seat, feeling suddenly completely at peace with the world as they swept around a corner and were on the main road back to the palace.

Her father looked down at her and smiled affectionately. "Glad to be going home, Sammie—Samantha?"

"Yes, Daddy. With you. And Daddy—"

"Yes, punkin?"

"You can call me Sammie. I sort of like it now."

He reached out an arm and drew her closer. She snuggled up against him, and there was only the sound of the wheels and the clopping of the horses' hooves as they rolled on.

The Last True God
[as by Philip St. John]

Keir Soth lifted his eyes wearily from the tattered fragment of a book he was trying to read as he heard the gritty cycle of the airlock. He sighed and rose to his feet to stare through the left vision port at the alien landscape beyond the ship.

Melok was a harsh world. Even at sunset it showed no softening of the raw desert that ran directly to the ugly brick towers of the city to Keir's right. The sky was dull with a thin overcast of dust and haze. Three miles away most of the red sun was hidden by the immense pyramid that was the native temple. Already there was a yellow wash of light glowing from an opening in the fane.

Por Dain came into the control room to stand beside him. The scientist was older than Keir and slightly shorter but they might have been brothers from their looks. Both were normally dark of complexion and abnormally lean and sharp of features. Por Dain had removed his protective garment but sand and grit still clung to the creases around his eyes. Fatigue from the double gravity of Melok showed in the droop of his shoulders.

"Five thousand light-years of searching space in this can," he muttered. "Then, less than thirty parsecs from home we find—this. By Earth, I'm tired of all these superstitious savages and their tin god!"

Keir Soth winced at the oath, reaching out to touch the tiny emblem that represented a hemisphere of lost Earth. He was not, of course, superstitious. But childhood habits were hard to break.

Por Dain snorted. "Can't you get it through your head there's no truth to the legend, Keir? How could any planet wrap itself in a silver haze and then just disappear—supposedly into some mystic higher dimension—to leave its colonies stranded? Tommyrot!"

"But we found the picture of just such a happening on that world in the third quandrant," the captain protested.

"A world that had been barren of human life for at least twenty thousand years," Por Dain reminded him. "Do you think our legend would have lasted that long?"

Keir Soth shook his head reluctantly. There were legends of some great war in the heavens that had blasted civilizations back some fifteen hundred years—and those were probably true. There was even evidence that

Melok itself might have been the enemy world, since it had been rendered almost lethally radioactive at the same time. Its atmosphere still contained more radiation than Keir found comfortable to think of. But a legend older than twenty millennia…?

And there were other puzzles. If men had been colonizing worlds so long ago, why were there no ancient and advanced worlds? Did every planet rise to spew out colonies and then die in some new holocaust of war with those colonies? Was life so stupid?

Lyssa the Novitiate came into the cabin then, bringing broth and platters of rations for them. She was quite typical of her kind—blond as no other women were, slight, resembling a porcelain doll. The girls who served Earth were carefully bred to look alike.

Surprisingly, Por Dain made room for her on his seat. The old agnostic usually avoided her, bitter at the law forcing all ships to carry at least one Novitiate. She smiled her usual pleasant and empty smile at him as she began the evening invocation in the ancient speech.

"*'F I forgethee Ozine…*"

"She did fine today," Por Dain admitted when he saw Keir's questioning look. "She talked that high priest Shaggoth into letting her up by that Earth-damned tin god of theirs and she planted three pickups."

She made the circle of Earth but the blasphemy didn't seem to bother her.

"Shaggoth calls it the last true god," Lyssa said.

She had been uncomplaining throughout the voyage. After finding the pieces of books on the ancient planet, she had even begun teaching them the ancient tongue. That had proved fortunate, since the natives of Melok also used it for their ritual and Shaggoth spoke it enough like Lyssa's version to be understood. She'd proved helpful enough on the voyage. Besides, men needed a woman on a long trip.

Why Shaggoth seemed to accept her was another puzzle about this dratted world. He had been rough enough on Por and Keir, forbidding them to come within three hundred feet of his fane. And he had refused to let even the girl see his sacred books, though he made no secret of their existence. The scholars back on Homeworld would give a dozen fortunes for the legends of any alien world, too!

It was dark outside—except for the red light of Melok's four visible moons—when Por Dain finished his food and stood up to try the tricky outside receptors. The old man's hands shook with fatigue as he tuned them. Then he grunted with pleasure and surprise. He had been tinkering with the receptors for weeks—and now at last one seemed to be working properly. It showed the inside of the temple clearly. Shaggoth was fussing about with bits of wire, making happy sounds. The high priest was a dark, hairy man, grotesquely short and ugly. There was something indecent about his expression and his chuckling.

Then the focus cleared for depth. For the first time, the two men saw the god worshiped on Melok.

"A robot!" Keir exclaimed. "A robot like the legends in the books from the ruined planet."

Por Dain nodded slowly. "Looks like it. I knew it was metal—yet how can it be? Metal would have gone to pieces by now. It must be some kind of statue shaped of tin and made to look like the robots their legends described. These savages are worshipping a machine."

It was an ancient piece in any event. Dust and grime had been polished from it but there was an unmistakable patina of centuries. It was vaguely manlike, though its face gained the touch of nobility without any definite features.

"Maybe it is the wreck of a real robot," Por decided. "If the ancients before the bombing here had some of our alloys—it could be. Now there's religion for you, Keir. A race of men blindly worshipping something they made for a servant."

Lyssa touched the Earth emblem but her smile remained unchanged. She no longer protested Por's remarks. Instead she pointed to Shaggoth, who was blowing out the torch and turning down the gas mantles.

"He's coming here," she said.

In that she was right. The pickup showed him moving across the sand toward them, badly distorted but recognizable.

Por had turned the gain up enough to see by the dim temple lights. He caught Keir's attention and began tracing the thing Shaggoth had been working on.

It was a weirdly wired mess of coils and blocks of some kind, seemingly directed toward their ship. Por pointed out where the wires led from it and were either stuck on the robot body or somehow plugged in.

"Must be a mockup of some machine from the legends," Keir guessed. "Ritual magic—similarity principle. But does he think some kind of god power is still generated in that creature?"

"There's always power in the god," Lyssa informed them. "Shaggoth has bragged of it. He makes miracle fires with it."

Any power in those batteries had been dead for millennia, Keir realized. But a clever priest could fake something to convince his followers.

"Maybe he's coming here to warn us he's making big medicine and we're in his power," Por guessed.

Lyssa shook her head, her smile deepening slightly. "He's coming to see me. He asked me; today. I think he wants to be converted to the blessed lost-Earth faith."

"You're not going out, Lyssa," Keir told her sharply. "And you're not letting him in," He flipped a toggle to cut in the hull pickups. Around the ship were some fifty partly concealed figures waiting patiently, as they had waited every night. "That's an order. Lyssa. Stay away from the airlock until morning."

She nodded faintly, then more firmly at his expression. "All right," she agreed softly, though her smile was almost gone. "Good night, then. I'll sleep now."

They heard her sounds of final prayers and the faint noise of her body sinking into the hammock in her tiny room. After a while Por Dain also retired.

Keir sat watching the high priest. Shaggoth reached the ship and knocked softly. Then he squatted down in the sand, motionless and patient. Keir waited but nothing else happened. And finally he released his control seat and sank onto it. The last sounds he heard were the heavy breathing of Por Dain and Lyssa's faintly adenoidal snores.

A heavy hand on his shoulder shook him back to consciousness. Por Dain stood over him, scowling and swearing.

"She's gone! The Earth-damned crusading little fool—she pulled a sneak and they're all gone."

Keir snapped out of his stupor. By the clock, six hours of the long Melok night had passed since he fell asleep. He saw that the outside hull pickups were on, showing no sign of the natives or of Shaggoth.

"We've got to get out and rescue her," he muttered thickly, reaching for the caffeine tablets.

"No chance. Holy Earth, look at them!"

Por Dain had turned the pickups toward the temple and the distorted one showed an enormous crowd of Melok natives streaming from the city and mounting toward their fane.

Then the one good pickup caught Shaggoth as the priest moved into view. Gas jets were now casting a half-light over the temple, and the priest was again busy with his wired contraption.

"Damn him," Por growled. "He isn't as ignorant as I thought. That savage is tuning a circuit, looks like. Ah!"

As he spoke, the contraption seemed to come to life. A blue glow ran over the coils and turned white. It seemed to spread like a spark climbing a Jacob's ladder. Then it was a faint glow of spherical shape that stretched and grew too thin to see.

Then acolytes appeared, bearing Lyssa. She was trussed firmly but seemed unharmed. She made no sound but her smile was gone. Her eyes, wide and round with fear, were centered on Shaggoth.

A chanting began as the acolytes laid her on a stone block before their last true god. Shaggoth approached her, holding two wands from which wires led to the robot's body.

Keir Soth found himself blaspheming heavily as he reached for the weapons in a drawer of the control panel.

But Por Dain held him back. "Don't be a fool, Captain. It's a bluff. He wants us to come out to rescue her. That's his whole plan. Then he'll have the ship. There must be a horde of the savages waiting below the hull where we can't pick them up."

"Then we'll take the ship there."

"No." Anger mingled with reluctant respect in Por Dain's expression. "I recognize that field he's generating now from the layout of parts. We've got one like it on Homeworld—only no bigger than a pea yet at maximum. You can't get through. It would damp the engines half a mile before we reached the pyramid."

No wonder the priest had refused to let them see the ancient books. He must have a technical library there—and somehow the old faker comprehended what was in them, however little he used them for the good of his followers. Shaggoth was staring directly into the pickup, as if aware that they could see him. Now he brought the wands into contact with Lyssa's body, smiling thickly as she screamed.

Keir began warming the engines. "I'll take the ship in as close as we dare," he said. "Then we get out and kill as many as we can trying to reach her."

Por Dain began loading the weapons as the engines warmed.

Again Shaggoth brought the insulated wands against the Novitiate's body. Her muscles tensed in a wild spasm but the savage chant rose to cover any cries she made.

The ship was just beginning to respond, rising sluggishly. Keir grinned thinly, hoping a horde of Melok natives were caught under that pressure field. The ship couldn't yet operate well but power was building up.

Again Melok brought down the wands. And this time the chant quieted.

"Help me—" Hers was a cry that should have torn the heart from a brazen idol. "For the love of Earth, help me—"

And help came.

The robot figure moved. A metal arm swung down to tear the wires free from its body. Slowly, ponderously, the figure straightened. There was a creaking sound as the limbs moved, and dirt and scale chipped away. Then it was erect.

In two strides the metal figure had caught the frozen priest and broken him like a thin stick across one knee. Shaggoth was flung back into the mob of screaming, fleeing worshippers.

For a moment the robot halted, staring toward Lyssa. It sank to gesture of some kind. A bass voice sounded over the pickup, using an oddly pure-sounding form of the ancient tongue.

"Saintly One, I—"

The words cut off as the robot bent closer. Then something like a sigh came from it. It stood up quietly, moving to snap the bindings away from Lyssa's limbs. She lay limp. The metal arms reached under her to lift her.

The robot turned then, facing away from the pickup for a long minute, its head up as if listening. Again there was a sigh.

"The field is too strong," the even bass voice said in the ancient tongue. The figure turned, searching until it located the pickup.

"I go by another way," the robot said slowly and carefully. "Your lady is safe but you who are in the ship must wait until I appear again."

It turned quickly toward the throne on which it had sat. A foot reached out to kick the massive structure aside, while a hand made a pass through the air. Almost instantly, an opening appeared in what had seemed solid rock. The robot stepped into it, carrying the Novitiate, and disappeared. Immediately after it was gone the rock closed tightly. A small explosion seemed to take place inside.

Keir had the ship up but now there was no place to go. "Wait until he appears where?" he asked bitterly. "Or until he can get safely hidden away with her in some hole in the ground?"

"Try cruising slowly toward the pyramid," Por Dain suggested. "Maybe there's a secret shaft out to the bottom and he'll show up there."

"He'd better."

* * *

Before the ship was in full motion, however, they saw the robot again. This time he was only a dot on their screen until Por raised the magnification of the hull pickup. He stood three miles from the pyramid on a narrow ledge of the most ancient of the brick structures. Lyssa was still unconscious in his arms. Somehow he had traveled that distance in less than five minutes. Now he stood staring into space, as if listening to a voice from, the stars.

Then his head dropped. "So long?" he asked. "Fifteen hundred years from the radiation that paralyzed my mind until the right words could waken me?" He sighed again and seemed to listen once more. He nodded slightly and turned to face the ship. From the receiver of the now useless temple pickup a softer and warmer voice spoke, using standard Homeworld speech. "Bring your ship close to me and open your airlock. I will leap across. And do not fear. I shall be the Watcher for Homeworld now, since these people have forfeited all right to one."

Keir Soth manipulated the ship very delicately across the small distance while Por Dain went down to the airlock. It was tricky maneuvering but Keir had time enough to see a series of small explosions running like a mole's trail from the pyramid across the desert to the big brick building. Whatever secret way the robot had known was destroyed now.

The metal figure leaped when the ship was fifty feet away. Keir flinched and held his breath. Then he heard the lock cycling to full space closure and the robot came into the control room, with Lyssa conscious and smiling her pleasant and empty smile beside him. Por Dain stood in the doorway as the robot glanced around at the controls.

"I have brought the few books from here that you can use," the robot said, pointing to a small sack Por Dain was holding. "There is no need to wait here longer."

He slipped confidently into the captain's chair, reaching for the controls. With unerring accuracy he plotted the course toward Homeworld and the ship began its gradual acceleration into the red sky and toward space.

Keir Soth shook his head, benumbed by wonder. "How could Melok have lost any war if they could create robots like you?"

The Watcher looked back at the three humans and his voice was soft but filled with immense pride. "I was never created on Melok," he said. "I came from Earth!"

There was only the soft drone of the ship's engines as Lyssa and Keir Soth slipped to their knees, to be followed a moment later by a former agnostic, Por Dain.

Forsaking All Others

Every Sunday, just as the sun touched the far hills, the tall young man came up the path from fishing. Sylva, the little oak dryad, had watched his comings and goings all during the summer, and now she crept out of her tree, glanced at the sun, and looked wistfully down the path that led to the brook.

He was on time again, his curly head and broad shoulders poking up over the summit of the hill, and she swayed toward him, while the old oak rustled gently above her in the still air. In supplication, she raised her hands toward the east and repeated her usual plea.

"Mother Goddess," she prayed, "make me be seen, this once. I have been dutiful to thy instructions, O Mother, and my tree has grown old and mighty in my care. The mortal has seen it, and rested under it, and the leaves tell me that he has found favor in its presence. Draw back the veil from his eyes and let me be visible to him."

A soft, sighing little wind wafted in from the east, stirring the green leaves of the oak, and she leaned back against the bole of her tree, willing herself to be seen. So intent was she that the sound of firm, light steps drew nearer and stopped behind her before she caught his presence.

"O Mother Ishtar," she whispered, "hear thy daughter, Sylva, and open his eyes to me."

But her prayers had already been answered. The bronzed young man had seen her and found the sight pleasing in his eyes, for he smiled with more than casual warmth in his greeting. "Hi, there. Where'd you come from?"

She caught breathlessly at her acorn necklace, and a light flush ran up her face. "I…I live here," she I answered softly. "So long I've lived here, and so lonely! Could you…would you stop and talk with me a little while, and tell me of yourself? Tell me what your name is and where you go?"

"Whoa, wait a minute!" His eyes ran over her lithe young figure, took in the youthful curves that showed above the brief line of a single garment, and ran up to her face. Then the elfin naiveté of her smile and the frankness of her eyes assured him, and he grinned again.

"You know, you're a funny kid. I was going home to supper, but I guess Mom won't care if I take half an hour more. The name's Paul Brandon."

"Mine's Sylva." She dropped down beside him on the mossy ground at the foot of the tree. "I don't know any men, but I like you—you're so nice. What does one say to men? Tell me about yourself, Paul."

He stared at her again, his eyes crinkling up in amusement. "You're doing all right," he answered. "Mind the pipe? Fine. Well, I'm pretty much ordinary, Sylva. See that little white house down there where the highway enters the village? That's where I live, with Mom and Pete, my dog. When Dad died, I left college to take care of Mom. Winters I sell things in the store, summers I work the truck garden and Mom runs the roadside stand for tourists. Sundays I fish. That suit you?"

"Uh-huh." She dropped her head back in the crook of Paul's elbow and twisted over to face him. An odor of leather and tobacco blended with the comforting effluvium of masculinity, and her little nose wrinkled in appreciation of his nearness. This was nice, she decided.

"Your family around here?" he asked. "What're you doing, anyway—camping out?"

"I have no family. I just live here in this tree."

Paul tamped the ashes down in his pipe. "Orphan, eh? Sounds like you're hard up against it for a fact, sleeping in trees. If you'd like to come down, Mom might put you up. No? Well, have it your way. Maybe I could bring you up some food or something tomorrow night."

"No food," she wiggled her toes against his ankles in lazy comfort. "Just come."

"Wood sprite," he chuckled. She looked up sharply, and smiled again, her usual half-serious little smile, as she read only gentle mockery in his eyes. "Just a crazy little kid running wild. I'll bet you grew up on 'Peter Pan' and 'Babes in the Woods'. Okay, see you tomorrow, sprite."

"Tomorrow." She watched him gather up his tackle and waved at him as he turned down the path toward the little white house. Then she leaned back against her tree and hugged her knees gleefully.

A sharp voice broke in on her reverie. "Sucker! You've been playing with fire, Sister Sylva, and you're burned!"

She swung about quickly and found Verda, the pine dryad, staring at her with hard eyes. Verda had lived in a pine tree located in one of the mortal villages once, and she regarded herself as superior to the unsophisticated dryads here in the grove. There were even rumors of an affair with a mortal poet, until the townspeople burned the pine.

Sylva shrank back before the other's scorn. "I was only talking to him," she protested. "He's so strong and young, not like those horrid mortals with axes who come and kill our homes."

"And so handsome," Verda mocked. "You'd like to be a mortal yourself, wouldn't you? Like to go down there and live in a…in a house, actually, and have children, and cook for him! And watch him grow old, and his hair and teeth fall out, while his skin puckered up like an apple left too long on the tree. Let the mortal alone, Sylva!"

"But you…I mean, I've heard—"

"That I tried it once. I did." Verda's eyes were less hard now, and she came over beside Sylva, dropping her hand on her sister's shoulder. When she spoke again, her voice was soft and almost pitying. "It's hard, little one. But you must forget him. Mother Ishtar made me tell the boy I worshipped that I was only a dryad, and he finally believed me. After that—" She shrugged. "Let the man alone, Sylva. That way lies only misery and heartbreak, cheap regrets, and bitter wounds. Better to mate with a faun than a human, and better yet to remain true to your tree. Go to sleep, little one, and think no more of mortals."

But Sylva did not obey; she sat with her back to the bole of the oak, staring down the valley toward a light that gleamed in the little house where he was, wondering and wishing, not knowing for what she wished. Finally the light blinked out, and a cloud over the moon covered the house from view. She sighed again, and stepped into her tree.

It was Sunday again, and this day he had not gone fishing. Now, as the sun edged stealthily toward the shelter of the hills in the west, Paul gathered the remains of his lunch together, and tucked the bundle under his head for a pillow, motioning Sylva down beside him. She dropped willingly into the shelter of his arm, and sniffed at the wisp of tobacco smoke that strayed vagrantly toward her.

He broke the silence. "I wish you'd come down and put up with Mom. This living in trees and eating only fruits sounds romantic, but it's not the life for a girl. I have an awful time when Mom asks questions that I can't answer about you, and there are so darned many things I don't know."

She nuzzled against his shoulder, delaying what she knew must be done. "You told your mother about me, Paul dear? But she must have hated me."

"Not Mom. She told me you sounded like a cross between a baby and an angel, sprite. If you want to keep your past from Mom and me, we won't ask foolish questions; it's what you are that counts with us, and she'll take my judgment of you."

"Your mother must be wonderful." Sylva crossed her fingers and bit her lips, gathering courage to keep her promise to Verda. "You won't believe what I'm going to tell you, Paul, but you must know the truth. I'm not what I seem."

He grinned. "I won't believe you're anything but sweet and good, sprite. Nothing else matters much."

"Paul." Her voice was serious. She pulled him to her, hid her face on his shoulder. "That's just it. It does matter. You see, I'm not…well, I'm not like you. I never lived in a house; I never knew any humans until I met you, never went to school or did any of the things you talk about. I'm just what you called me—a sprite of the woods."

He looked down at her, pulling her face up; then seeing that she wanted to continue, he wisely refrained from interrupting. "I grew here, with this oak; all my life I've tended it, watching the acorns come in the fall, seeing that it was watered, that the leaves were clean, that no trouble should come to it. My whole life has centered here. When the autumn comes, I wear red and russet, gray in the winter, green in the spring and summer. Don't you see, I'm part of the tree.

"I never had a mother or father, Paul. No dryad has. That's reserved for mortals, and I'm not a mortal. Ishtar created me and gave me my duties, and all I know was born in me. I'm something out of your storybooks, something that shouldn't be, according to the world you know. People don't believe in dryads any more." There, it was done. She clung to him, her body shaking with the effort of her confession, while she waited for the things Verda had hinted.

But he only held her firmly and smiled slowly. "You believe that, don't you, honey? Then I won't laugh at you. But I don't believe it. Know what I think?"

She shook her head, and he went on. "I think you had trouble sometime, somewhere, and some shock that left you without your memory; amnesia, we call it. When you first became aware of yourself, you were here by the tree, and your mind fixed on some fairy tale you half-remembered. All this imaginary life of yours could become quite real to you, that way. Poor little sprite."

"But suppose what I said is true?"

"It isn't. And even if such things could be, what difference would it make? You'd still be you. No, Sylva, if it pleases you, believe it." His pipe had gone out, and he paused to light it again. "Of course, I should take you to a doctor, in the hope that he might ferret out your trouble and find that lost past of yours. But I won't.

"If you had friends or relatives, they'd have traced you or gone to the papers and police; you couldn't have wandered far in your condition. So your past must have been as empty as your present, and I'm selfish enough to want you as you are. We'll let the past bury itself, and hope it never shows up—you might have had a husband who deserted you, or something."

"No, Paul." There was no use trying to convince him. In the mortal world everything had an explanation, and nothing could exist without one. Verda's mortal had been a poet, and poets are supposed to be credulous; Paul was practical in his beliefs.

"No," he agreed. "I can't see that in your past. And I suppose I'll have to let you stay here in this tree again? I thought so. For such a sweet little sprite, you're remarkably stubborn. I'll tell Mom about the amnesia so she won't ask questions when you come down to visit us Tuesday."

"Visit you?"

"Uh-huh. Mom figures it's about time she sees you, so she told me you were to come for lunch, at least, Tuesday."

"But I can't." There was fright in her eyes again. Paul chose to disregard it.

"You're coming. I'll tell Mom you agreed." His tone held absolute finality. "Mom doesn't bite, and she's a scrumptious cook. Which reminds me, it's time I went down to supper." He gathered up his possessions, and began brushing the moss off his jacket.

"You'll come tomorrow?"

"I'll come at the usual time."

She watched him go, and this time there was a haunted look on her face as she gazed on the little white house toward which his figure was moving; just so she might have looked on a jail. Verda, who had come to berate her and to learn the result of her confession, paused and turned silently away.

That night Sylva sat up long after the last light had been turned out in the house where he lived. Then she crept quietly into her tree without her usual words of good night to it. But it seemed to understand, for the leaves above were rustling a soothing little lullaby.

Verda stood back and surveyed her handiwork with a critical eye. Sylva was pretty, no two ways about it, gowned in a hastily contrived dress that managed to cover her adequately. Paul had brought the materials from the village the day before, and the two dryads had worked on it half the night, adjusting and fitting it—work to which they were ill accustomed.

"You'll pass," Verda admitted grudgingly. "If you must make a fool of yourself, you might as well do a good job of it. Though what Mother Ishtar would think of your running off this way and visiting around with humans, I'd hate to guess. I never deserted my tree, and she almost refused to give me a new one when they burned the other!"

Sylva's answer carried the determination of stubbornness which fears its own results. "But he wants me to go."

"So, of course, you have to!" Verda's smile was as dry as her voice. "Mortal women don't jump and run at the call of men. They make the men do things for them, and then laugh behind their backs, calling the poor males fools and weaklings. What's to come of it all, Sylva? Go back to your tree and pray for the Mother to draw back the veil over his eyes that he no longer may see you."

Sylva was watching the path. "He's coming," she whispered. "Oh, Verda, I'm scared! Suppose I fail? What if his mother should hate me? I never did this before, and everything will go wrong; I know it will! And I don't want him to be ashamed of me."

"Chin up, little one. You won't fail." Verda drew back to her pine. "If he isn't proud of you, I'll tear my tree up by the roots and throw it on him." She had reverted to her maternal mood, and her eyes sparkled fiercely. "You just show them, Sylva. You're too good for mortals, anyway. I'll try to take care of your tree as well as I can while you're gone."

Sylva glanced guiltily toward the oak, then caught her breath, set her lips firmly, and turned down the path toward him. Already, she was farther from her tree than she had ever gone before, and she was still farther when she met him on the trail.

"I'm re-ready." She swallowed her heart twice, but it till came back to her throat.

His smile was gentle. "So I see, and very lovely. I fixed it with Mom for you to leave in an hour or so, since you don't want to stay long. Mom's going to love you."

"Suppose she can't see me? Maybe you're the only human who can."

"I thought we'd agreed to forget about that. Even suppose you are a sprite—which you're not, really—when she knows where to look for you, and what to see, you'd be visible anyway. The dryads are invisible, according to what I could find out, only because disbelief on our part makes them so."

She nodded glumly, and they completed the walk in silence. As the little white house drew nearer, her steps grew slower, and the voice within shouted for her to turn back while there was yet time. But they reached the flagstone walk, then the door, and he was greeting a little plump women with streaks of white in her hair and a hint of a smile tucked in the corners of her eyes.

"Back so soon, son? But where—" She passed her hand over her eyes and looked again. "How stupid of me! There you are, of course, my dear. Come in. Paul, she's charming!"

"Meet the wood sprite, Mom." Under his banter, there was pride in both of them, and some of the fear left the little dryad. She hesitated at the threshold, fighting some unseen barrier. Then his hand found her arm and she was in the house between hard walls and glazed windows that kept out the fresh winds that had been her tutors. Some of the fear returned, and she felt wilted, like a flower in the hot sun. But she shrugged, and it passed.

Pete, the dog, walked around her slowly, his hackles lifted. She reached out timidly to touch him; he sniffed her hand, relaxed, and wagged his tail, while Paul laughed. "Pete approves of you, too."

"Of course, he does," Mom seconded. "Why shouldn't he?"

There was tea and fruit, and little cakes that Sylva tried gingerly, and found delicious. And there was light talk, while under it one could sense a series of barriers that dropped away and were forgotten. Mortal though they were, she found in them nothing to fear, and for Mom there could be only love. The tight closeness of the room thawed slowly to show the comfort that comes from that neatness which does not offend by being too strait-laced. Still, the hour was slow in passing, and she was glad when her feet were again on the path that led back to her tree.

"Mom likes you," Paul said contentedly. "I knew she would. She told me before we left that she felt as if you were the daughter she'd wanted but couldn't have."

"She's sweet, your mother. I wish I were her daughter."

He hesitated only a fraction of a second. "You could be, you know. Will you, honey?"

"You mean—"

"Yes."

The difference between them, which she had almost forgotten, came rushing back to her mind. "Paul, dear, I couldn't." There was a tenseness under the words that he only partly sensed. "You're a mortal, and I'm not. Oh, I know you don't believe me; but I know."

"Angel sprite," he said gently, "does it matter, even if you are what you think? Surely you know what I think of you. And I've been hoping you felt the same."

"I do, Paul. But the children of such a cross are fauns, wilder even than I."

"You mean satyrs—half goat, half man? Curious; the mythology I've read didn't mention it that way." He brushed it out of his mind. "Well, then, we won't have children. See how simple it is."

It was her turn to be gentle. "No, dear one, it won't work. You laugh at my ideas, but underneath you're beginning to believe me. Such things never succeed."

They reached the tree, and he looked at it doubtfully. The leaves had hung down limply when he had first spied it from the path, but now they were rustling again in the wind. "Perhaps I do begin to believe, a little. But such things have happened before, back in the days of Greece. Don't answer now, but think it over. Tomorrow, your answer may be changed."

"Perhaps. If you find me here, I'll go with you; otherwise, it's best we see no more of each other." She turned her back hastily, and he went down the path and passed slowly beyond her hearing.

"Verda!" she called, tearing the dress off. As it came over her head, the other was beside her. "Verda, it's happened—happened to me!"

"I know, little one. Perhaps I've known it before this, but wouldn't stop fighting." Verda's arms were soft and soothing as she drew Sylva's head against her breast and stroked the silky hair. "We two were cast in the lot of fools, but at least you chose more worthily than I. And it's too late for fighting now; in this emotion, the mortal maids are stronger than we."

"But what can I do now?"

"Go to him, child. With him there may be yet some grains of happiness, but without, there can be none; that I know full well." The muscles on Verda's arms were bunched in long knots, but her hands were still gentle on the tired little brow. "But first, go to the grove. Perhaps Mother Ishtar may visit you, and she sometimes grants favors. Not without a price, since the gods barter rather than give—but kindness still."

The crescent of the moon was rising in the east as Sylva crept out of the thicker woods into the grove, and the little folk were busy at their labors. She passed to the center of the clearing that was there and seated herself before the boulder that bore a rough looped cross, etched in it by the passing of wind and water. She made no prayer, for a shred of outer knowledge told her that this rested on the whims of the gods, not on prayers.

Upon the rock there was a stronger gleam of moonlight, and as she watched, it thickened and became a halo above. A wisp of mist drew into it and slowly took form, and the birds nesting in the trees chirped sleepily. Before her eyes, the shape became that of a woman, designed beyond the plan of flesh, and with a great soft light shining through it, as from some outer sphere. Above was a crescent of pearly nascence, and Sylva heard the faint murmurings of doves from a great distance. The dryad lowered her eyes and caught at the hem of translucent drape that clothed the figure.

The voice she heard was low and soft, but there was power to its infinite compassion that burned through the brain. "No, my daughter, wait. There is yet another who must come this night." Ishtar turned her head to the shadows that lay thick at the edge of the clearing, and her low voice seemed to ripple across the moonlit grass. "Come out, Pan, Father of All Gods!"

This time the shadows coalesced and became substance, and the moon fell on another figure that came dancing across the grass toward the goddess in the rhythm of wild and stately steps. Pan was caproid no more than anthropomorphic, and his figure seemed to shape itself at the pleasure of the wind. But the forest rocked to his steps, and the trees in the grove shook and rustled with the sound of a great flute. With a bound, he was beside Ishtar, gazing down from his red eyes at Sylva.

"Moon Mother, you called and I am come. Bid our handmaiden and daughter arise and face our presence."

Sylva rose at a gesture from the goddess, and Ishtar began. "Sylva, little dryad, thou art come before the gods with troubled heart, and we see upon it the image of one who is not of us. And it comes to us that there is a favor thou'dst have of us."

Sylva genuflected. "Surely the gods must know it. O Mother, give me a soul and let me become a mortal!"

Pan's great bellow answered. "As to the soul, that lies beyond the gods. Each must grow and shape his own, and never find it done."

"Aye." Ishtar inclined her head lightly. "As a mortal, thou wouldst find the seed of that soul within thee; it grows from thy thoughts and is shaped before the smiles and frowns of others. As to the other matter, there is a price."

"I know, Mother. Give it to me and let me pay it."

The Mother shook her head. "One above us demands it, and only that one can reveal it; the one thou dost know as Time. But his price is as great as the gift, and perhaps greater. Remember, Sylva, that as dryad or as mortal, Pan's breath was upon thee as I shaped thee long ago. And whom Pan has breathed upon remains always of the wild...Still, if it is thy true desire, beyond all else, and forsaking all others, then that desire shall be a boon from us."

Sylva spoke surely. "It is my desire, Mother."

Ishtar's scepter of light stretched forth, and something filmy floated to it from the dryad, and vanished; Pan's long arm reached out to her breast, and a little green amulet appeared in his palm. He spoke to Ishtar again, his goat face smiling with a queer tenderness.

"That which is of us is returned again unto us. Send her forth to rove among mortals and seek the soul she has asked of us."

Sylva bowed low and softly withdrew. But as she left, she could hear their voices, first the great rumble of Pan behind her.

"Moon Mother, she is weak, and the gift we have given is heavy!"

And Ishtar's voice followed. "Aye, Pan. Yet she is like her tree, the oak, strong and deep-rooted in this storm. Perchance the price of our favor is not greater than she can pay." Then there came the low sound of the doves and the piping of a pagan dance, which faded away, and left Sylva standing beneath her tree.

But now the leaves drooped again, and her presence did not abate the doom of the tree. She was mortal. The wind that blew upon her no longer caressed, and the oak no longer was her home. She looked down at the little house in the village and her sigh was long as its lights went out.

The sun was barely up when Paul found her in the morning, standing with her back to the tree. He stopped to gaze eagerly, and laughed away his doubts of her humanness; plainly she was a girl, flesh and blood, and by her presence, promised as his. He sprang forward in great bounds toward her, a glad cry on his lips.

She checked it with a gesture. "Yes, Paul, I've chosen. But let us save our words till later. We can talk in your—our home."

At his nod, she went quietly up to the oak and threw her arms about it; a faint murmur came from its leaves, and she kissed the wrinkled bark, patted the bole tenderly, and turned her back on it resolutely. Then she gave Paul her hand, and turned with him toward the village.

"I've told Mom to expect you," he said. "She has the preacher ready, and a few friends. I thought you'd prefer a quiet wedding at home, and Mom agreed."

Sylva smiled briefly. "You were sure of my answer, weren't you? I'm glad. And yet, I'm so ignorant of your ways. Perhaps my answer was wrong. But I will try—"

He pressed her hand lightly. "It was very right, wood sprite."

She wanted to turn back, to look behind; but that way there was only the past to see, and ahead lay the future. There was the white house, its neat yard, and behind it the truck garden. Below it was the roadside stand where she could help Mom run the business during the summer—the next summer.

And after that, perhaps, there would be boys to work in the garden with Paul, and girls to run to her and to Mom with their little troubles. Maybe in time, a mellow age, and certainly death. She had not thought of death when she asked for mortality, and yet she was not sorry; as a creature of the wild, she had known it, and learned that it can be merciful more often than cruel.

The path twisted its way slowly down toward the house, and their steps dragged as they approached. Paul had caught her mood and was humoring her, though his desire was to rush onward toward the future.

At last they reached the gate, and she paused, gazing at the house. Again, the sense of being shut up away from the wind and the rain swept over her, and she saw only the walls standing guard against all the world that she had known. There would, be only mortals in the life ahead, humans whose imagination, like the dwellers in the house, were guarded by firm-built walls that refused to let in any breath of whimsy that came from beyond their own little worlds.

And she would have to mix with them, to become one of them—was already one of them. She would have to check her thoughts, and turn to the new gods that they followed, for Ishtar and Pan, with Verda and her oak, lay far behind her.

Paul's voice broke in on her thoughts. "Angel sprite, are you sure you love me? Quite sure?"

She turned back then toward the woods on the hill. Up there, by the tree that had formed her life, she saw the form of Verda looking down, and the sister dryad was waving something at her. Then her eyes made out two other shapes near the tree, hanging suspended above the earth Pan was there, for once standing quietly looking at her, and beside him was Ishtar. In benediction, the crux ansata in the goddess' hand stretched forth, then faded. As Sylva watched, the figures of Pan and the Mother disappeared, and Verda, too, was growing dim. Then there was only the dying tree, standing forsaken, its leaves wilted and drooping. And in her mind, the cool voice of Ishtar seemed to whisper faintly: "There is a price."

She knew the price now, such a price as only one born of the wild could know. But her voice was without a quaver, her hand steady in Paul's, and Sylva was facing the house with a little smile when she made answer to his question.

"Yes, my dear, quite sure. More sure than you can ever know."

Into Thy Hands

Simon Ames was old, and his face was bitter as only that of a confirmed idealist can be. Now a queer mixture of emotions crossed it momentarily, as he watched the workmen begin pouring cement to fill the small opening of the domelike structure, but his eyes returned again to the barely visible robot within.

"The last Ames' Model Ten," he said ruefully to his son, "And even then I couldn't put in full memory coils! Only the physical sciences here; biologicals in the other male form, humanities in the female. I had to fall back on books and equipment to cover the rest. We're already totally converted to soldier robots, and no more humanoid experiments…Dan, is there no conceivable way war can be avoided?"

The young Rocket Force captain shrugged, and his mouth twitched unhappily. "None, Dad. They've fed their people on the glories of carnage and loot so long they have to find some pretext to use their hordes of warrior robots."

"Mmm…The stupid, blind idiots!" The old man shuddered. "Dan, it sounds like old wives' fears, but this time it's true; unless we somehow avoid or win this war quickly, there'll be no one left to wage another. I've spent my life on robots; I know what they can do—and should never be made to do! Do you think I'd waste a fortune on these storehouses on a mere whim?"

"I'm not arguing, Dad. God knows, I feel the same!" Dan watched the workmen pour the last concrete, to leave no break in the twenty-foot thick walls. "Well, at least if anyone does survive, you've done all you can for them. Now it's in the hands of God!"

Simon Ames nodded, but there was no satisfaction on his face as he turned back with his son. "All we could—and never enough! And God? I wouldn't even know to pray for the survival of which of the three—science, life or culture…" The words sighed into silence, and his eyes went back to the filled-in tunnel.

Behind them, the ugly dome hugged the ground while the rains of God and of man's destruction washed over it. Snow covered it and melted, and other things built up that no summer sun could disperse, until the ground was level with its top. The forest crept forward, and the seasons flicked by in unchanging changes that pyramided decade upon century. Inside, the shining case of SA-10 waited immovably.

And at last the lightning struck, blasting through a tree, downward into the dome, to course through a cable, short-circuit a ruined timing switch, and spend itself on the ground below.

Above the robot, a cardinal burst into song, and he looked up, his stolid face somehow set in a look of wonder. For a moment, he listened, but the bird had flown away at the sight of his lumbering figure. With a tired little sigh, he went in, crashing through the brush of the forest until he came back near the entrance to his cave.

The sun was bright above, and he studied it thoughtfully; the word he knew, and even the complex carbon-chain atomic breakdown that went on within it. But he did not know how he knew, or why.

For a second longer he stood there silently, then opened his mouth for a long wailing cry. "Adam! Adam, come forth!" But there were doubts in the oft-repeated call now and the pose of his head as he waited. And again only the busy sounds of the forest came back to him.

"Or God? God, do You hear me?"

But the answer was the same. A field mouse slipped out from among the grass and a hawk soared over the woods. The wind rustled among the trees, but there was no sign from the Creator. With a lingering backward look, he turned slowly to the tunnel he had made and wriggled back down it into his cave.

Inside, light still came from a single unbroken bulb, and he let his eyes wander from the jagged breach in the thick wall across to where some ancient blast had tossed crumpled concrete against the opposite side. Between lay only ruin and dirt. Once, apparently, that half had been filled with books and films, but now there were only rotted fragments of bindings and scraps of useless plastic tape mixed with broken glass in the filth of the floor.

Only on the side where he had been was the ruin less than complete. There stood the instruments of a small laboratory, many still useful, and he named them one by one, from the purring atomic generator to the projector and screen set up on one table.

Here, in his mind, were order and logic, and the world above had conformed to an understandable pattern. He alone seemed to be without purpose. How had he come here, and why had he no memory of himself? If there was no purpose, why was he sentient at all? The questions held no discoverable answers.

There were only the cryptic words on the scrap of plastic tape preserved inside the projector. But what little of them was understandable was all he had; he snapped off the light and squatted down behind the projector, staring intently at the screen as he flicked the machine on.

There was a brief fragment of some dark swirling, and then dots and bright spheres, becoming suns and planets that spun out of nothing into a celestial pattern. "In the beginning," said a voice quietly, "God created the heavens and the earth." And the screen filled with that, and the beginnings of life.

"Symbolism?" the robot muttered. Geology and astronomy were part of his knowledge, at least; and yet, in a mystic beauty, this was true enough. Even the life-forms above had fitted with those being created on the screen.

Then a new voice, not unlike his own in resonant power, filled the speaker. "Let Us go down and create man in Our Image!" And a shifting mist of light that symbolized God appeared, shaping man from the dust of the ground and breathing life into him. Adam grew lonely, and Eve was made from his rib, to be shown Eden and tempted by the serpentine mist of darkness; and she tempted the weak Adam, until God discovered their sin and banished them. But the banishment ended in a blur of ruined film as the speaker went dead.

The robot shut it off, trying to read its meaning. It must concern him, since he alone was here to see it. And how could that be unless he were one of its characters? Not Eve or Satan, but perhaps Adam; but then God should have answered him. On the other hand, if he were God, then perhaps the record was unfulfilled and Adam not yet formed, so that no answer could be given.

He nodded slowly to himself. Why should he not have rested here with this film to remind him of his plan, while the world readied itself for Adam? And now, awake again, he must go forth and create man in his own image! But first, the danger of which the film had warned must be removed.

He straightened, determination coming into his steps as squirmed purposefully upwards. Outside the sun was still shining, and he headed toward it into the grossly unkempt Eden forest. Now stealth came to him as he moved silently through the undergrowth, like a great metal wraith, with eyes darted about and hands ready to snap forward at lightning speed.

And at last he saw it, curled up near a large rock. It was smaller than he had expected, a mere six feet of black, scaly suppleness, but the shape and forked tongue were unmistakable. He was on it with a blur of motion and a cry of elation; and when he moved away, the lifeless object on the rock was forever past corrupting the most naïve Eve.

The morning sun found the robot bent over what had once been a wild pig, a knife moving precisely in his hand. Delicately he opened the heart and manipulated it, studying the valve action. Life, he was deciding, was highly complex, and a momentary doubt struck him. It had seemed easy on the film! And at times he wondered why he should know the complex order of the heavens but nothing of this other creation of his.

But at last he buried the pig's remains, and settled down among the varicolored clays he had collected, his fingers moving deftly as he rolled a white type into bones for the skeleton, followed by a red clay heart. The tiny nerves and blood vessels were beyond his means, but that could not be helped; and surely if he had created the gigantic sun from nothing, Adam could rise from the crudeness of his sculpturing.

The sun climbed higher, and the details multiplied. Inside the last organ was complete, including the greyish lump that was the brain, and he began the red sheathing of muscles. Here more thought was required to adapt what he had learned of the pig to the longer limbs and different structure of this new body; but his mind pushed grimly on with the mathematics involved, and at last it was finished.

Unconsciously he began a crooning imitation of the bird songs as his fingers molded the colored clays to hide the muscles and give smooth symmetry to the body. He had been forced to guess at the color, though the dark lips on the film had obviously been red from blood within them.

Twilight found him standing back, nodding approval of the work. It was a faithful copy of the film Adam, waiting the breath of life; and that must come from him, be a part of the forces that flowed through his own metal nerves and brain.

Gently he fastened wires to the head and feet of the clay body; then he threw back his chest plate to fasten the other ends to his generator terminals, willing the current out into the figure lying before him. Weakness flooded through him instantly, threatening to black out his consciousness, but he did not begrudge the energy. Steam was spurting up and covering the figure as a mist had covered Adam, but it slowly subsided, and he stopped the current, stealing a second for relief as the full current coursed back through him. Then softly he unhooked the wires and drew them back.

"Adam!" The command rang through the forest, vibrant with his urgency. "Adam, rise up! I, your creator, command it!"

But the figure lay still, and now he saw great cracks in it, while the noble smile had baked into a gaping leer. There was no sign of life! It was dead, as the ground from which it came.

He squatted over it, moaning, weaving from side to side, and his fingers tried to draw the ugly cracks together, only to cause greater ruin. At last he stood up, stamping his feet until all that was left was a varicolored smear on the rock. Still he stamped and moaned as he destroyed the symbol of his failure. The moon mocked down at him with a wise and cynical face, and he howled at it in rage and anguish, to be answered by a lonely owl, querying his identity.

A powerless God, or a Godless Adam! Things had gone so well in the film as Adam rose from the dust of the ground…

But the film was symbolism, and he had taken it literally! Of course he had failed. The pigs were not dust, but colloidal jelly complexes. And they knew more than he, for there had been little ones that proved they could somehow pass the breath of life along.

Suddenly he squared his shoulders and headed into the forest again. Adam should yet rise to ease his loneliness. The pigs knew the secret, and he could learn it; what he needed now were more pigs, and they should not be too hard to obtain.

But two weeks later it was a worried robot who sat watching his pigs munch contentedly at their food. Life, instead of growing simpler, had become more complicated. The fluoroscope and repaired electron microscope had shown him much, but always something was lacking. Life seemed to begin only with life; for even the two basic cells were alive in some manner strangely different from his own. Of course God-life might differ from animal-life, but…

With a shrug he dismissed his metaphysics and turned back to the laboratory, avoiding the piglets that ambled trustingly under his feet. Slowly he drew out the last ovum from the nutrient fluid in which he kept it, placing it on a slide and under the optical microscope. Then, with a little platinum filament, he brought a few male spermatazoa toward the ovum, his fingers moving surely through the thousandths of an inch needed to place it.

His technique had grown from failures, and now the sperm cell found and pierced the ovum. As he watched, the round single cell began to lengthen and divide across the middle. This was going to be one of his successes! There were two, then four cells, and his hands made lightening, infinitesimal gestures, keeping it within the microscope field while he changed the slide for a thin membrane, lined with thinner tubes to carry oxygen, food and tiny amounts of the stimulating and controlling hormones with which he hoped to shape its formation.

Now there were eight cells, and he waited feverishly for them to put out a tube toward the membrane as they did toward the pig's womb…But they did not! As he watched, another division began, but stopped; the cells had died again. All his labor and thought had been futile, as always.

He stood mere silently, relinquishing all pretensions to godhood. His mind abdicated, letting the dream vanish into nothingness; and there was nothing to take its place and give him purpose and reason—only a vacuum instead of a design.

Dully he unbarred the rude cage and began chasing the grumbling, reluctant pigs out and up the tunnel, into the forest and away. It was a dull morning, with no sun apparent, and it matched his mood as the last one disappeared, leaving him doubly lonely. They had been poor companions, but they had occupied his time, and the little ones had appealed to him. Now even they were gone.

Wearily he dropped his six hundred pounds onto the turf, staring at the black clouds over him. An ant climbed up his body inquisitively, and he watched it without interest. Then it, too, was gone.

"Adam!" The cry came from the woods, ringing and compelling. "Adam, come forth!"

"God!" With metal limbs that were awkward and unsteady, he jerked upright. In the dark hour of his greatest need, God had finally come! "God, here I am!"

"Come forth, Adam, Adam! Come forth, Adam!"

With a wild cry, the robot dashed forward toward the woods, an electric tingling suffusing him. He was no longer unwanted, no longer a lost chip in the storm. God had come for him. He stumbled on, tripping over branches, crashing through bushes, heedless of his noise; let God know his eagerness. Again the call came, no longer from straight ahead, and he turned a bit, lumbering forward. "Here I am, I'm coming!"

God would ease his troubles and explain why he was so different from the pigs; God would know all that. And then there'd be Eve, and no more loneliness! He'd have trouble keeping her from the Tree of Knowledge, but he wouldn't mind that!

And from still a different direction the call reached him…Perhaps God was not pleased with his noise. The robot quieted his steps and went forward reverently. Around him the birds sang, and now the call came again, ringing and close. He hastened on, striving to blend speed with quiet in spite of his weight.

The pause was longer this time, but when the call came it was almost overhead. He bowed lower and crept to the ancient oak from which it came, uncertain, half-afraid, but burning with anticipation.

"Come forth, Adam, Adam!" The sound was directly above, but God did not manifest Himself visibly. Slowly the robot looked up through the boughs of the tree. Only a bird was there—and from its open beak the call came forth again. "Adam, Adam!"

A mockingbird he'd heard imitating the other birds now mimicking his own voice and words! And he'd followed that through the forest, hoping to find God! He screeched suddenly at the bird, his rage so shrill that it leaped from the branch in hasty flight, to perch in another tree and cock Its head at him. "God?" it asked in his voice, and changed to the raucous call of a jay.

The robot slumped back against the tree, refusing to let hope ebb completely from him. He knew so little of God; might not He have used the bird to call him here? At least the tree was not unlike the one under which God had put Adam to sleep before creating Eve.

First sleep, *then* the coming of God! He stretched out determinedly, trying to imitate the pigs' torpor, fighting back its mind's silly attempts to speculate as to where his rib might be. It was slow and hard, but he persisted grimly, hypnotizing himself into mental numbness; and bit by bit, the sounds of the forest faded to only a trickle in his head. Then that, too, was stilled.

He had no way of knowing how long it lasted, but suddenly he sat up groggily, to the rumble of thunder, while a torrent of lashing rain washed in blinding sheets over his eyes. For a second, he glanced quickly at his side, but there was no scar.

Fire forked downward into a nearby tree, throwing splinters of it against him. This was definitely not the way the film had gone! He groped to his feet, flinging some of the rain from his face, to stumble forward toward his cave. Again lightning struck, nearer, and he increased his pace to a driving run. The wind lashed the trees, snapping some with wild ferocity, and it took the full power of his magnets to forge ahead at ten miles an hour instead of his normal fifty. Once the wind caught him unaware, and crashed him down over a rock with a wild clang of metal, but it could not harm him, and he stumbled on until he reached the banked up entrance of his muddy tunnel.

Safe inside, he dried himself with the infra-red lamp, sitting beside the hole and studying the wild fury of the gale. Surely its furor held no place for Eden, where dew dampened the leaves in the evening under caressing, musical breezes!

He nodded slowly, his clenched jaws relaxing. This could not be Eden, and God expected him there. Whatever evil knowledge of Satan had lured him here and stolen his memory did not matter; all that counted was to return, and that should be simple, since the Garden lay among rivers. Tonight out of the storm he'd prepare here, and tomorrow he'd follow the stream in the woods until it led him where God waited.

With the faith of a child, he turned back and began tearing the thin berylite panels from his laboratory tables and cabinets, picturing his homecoming and Eve. Outside the storm raged and tore, but he no longer heard it. Tomorrow he would start for home! The word was misty in his mind, as all the nicer words were, but it had a good sound, free of loneliness, and he liked it.

Six hundred long endless years had dragged their slow way into eternity, and even the tough concrete floor was pitted by those centuries of pacing and waiting. Time had eroded all hopes and plans and wonder, and now there was only numb despair, too old to vent itself even in rage or madness.

The female robot slumped motionlessly on the atomic excavator, her eyes staring aimlessly across the dome, beyond the tiers of books and films and the hulking machines that squatted eternally on the floor. There a pickax lay, and her eyes rested on it listlessly; once, when the dictionary revealed its picture and purpose, she had thought it the key to escape, but now it was only another symbol of futility.

She wandered over aimlessly, picking it up by its two metal handles and striking the wooden blade against the wall; another splinter chipped from the wood, and century-old dust dropped to the floor, but that offered no escape. Nothing did. Mankind and her fellow robots must have perished long ago, leaving her neither hope for freedom nor use for it if freedom were achieved.

Once she had planned and schemed with all her remarkable knowledge of psychology to restore man's heritage, but now the note-littered table was only a mockery; she thrust out a weary hand—

And froze into a metal statue! Faintly, through all the metal mesh and concrete, a dim, weak signal trickled into the radio that was part of her!

With all her straining energy, she sent out an answering call; but there was no response. As she stood rigidly for long minutes, the signals grew stronger, but remained utterly aloof and unaware of her. Now some sudden shock seemed to cut through them, raising their power until the thoughts of another robot mind were abruptly clear—thoughts without sense, clothed in madness! And even as the lunacy registered, they began to fade; second by second, they dimmed into the distance and left her alone again and hopeless!

With a wild, clanging yell, she threw the useless pickax at the wall, watching it rebound in echoing din. But she was no longer aimless; her eyes had noted chipped concrete breaking away with the sharp metal point, and she caught the pick before it could touch the floor, seizing the nub of wood in small, strong hands. The full force of her magnets lifted and swung, while her feet kicked aside the rubble that came cascading down from the force of her blows.

Beyond that rapidly crumbling concrete lay freedom and—madness! Surely there could be no human life in a world that could drive a robot mad, but if there were...She thrust back the picture and went savagely on attacking the massive wall.

The sun shone on a drenched forest filled with havoc from the storm, to reveal the male robot pacing tirelessly along the banks of the shallow stream. In spite of the heavy burden he carried, his legs moved swiftly now, and when he came to sandy stretches, or clear land that bore only turf, his great strides lengthened still further; already he had dallied too long with delusions in this unfriendly land.

Now the stream joined a larger one, and he stopped, dropping his ungainly bundle and ripping it apart. Scant minutes later, he was pushing an assembled berylite boat out and climbing in. The little generator from the electron microscope purred softly and a steam jet began hissing underneath; it was crude, but efficient, as the boiling wake behind him testified, and while slower than his fastest pace, here would be no detours or impassable barriers to bother him.

The hours sped by and the shadows lengthened again, but now the stream was wider, and his hopes increased, though he watched the banks idly, not yet expecting Eden. Then he rounded a bend to jerk upright and head toward shore, observing something totally foreign to the landscape. As he beached the boat, and drew nearer, he saw a great gaping hole bored into the earth for a hundred feet in depth and a quarter mile in diameter, surrounded by obviously artificial ruins. Tall bent shafts stuck up haphazard, amid jumbles of concrete and bits of artifacts damaged beyond recognition. Nearby a pole leaned at a silly angle, bearing a sign.

He scratched the corrosion off and made out dim words: WELCOME TO HOGANVILLE. POP. 1,876. It meant nothing to him, but the ruins fascinated him. This must be some old trick of Satan; such ugliness could be nothing else.

Shaking his head, he turned back to the boat, to speed on while the stars came out. Again he came to ruins, and harder to see, since the damage was more complete and the forest had claimed most of it. He was only sure because of the jagged pits in which not even a blade of grass would grow. And sometimes as the night passed there were smaller pits, as if some single object had been blasted out of existence. He gave up the riddle of such things, finally; it was no concern of his.

When morning came again, the worst ruins were behind, and the river was wide and strong, suggesting that the trip must be near its end. Then the faint salty tang of the ocean reached him, and he whooped loudly, scanning the country for an observation point.

Ahead, a low hill broke the flat country, topped by a rounded bowl of green, and he made toward it. The boat crunched on gravel, and he was springing off over the turf to the hill, up it, and onto the bowl-shaped top that was covered with vines. Here the whole lower course of the river was visible, with no more large branches in the twenty-five miles to the sea. The land was pleasant and gentle, and it was not hard to imagine Eden out there.

But now for the first time, as he started down, he noticed that the mound was not part of the hill as it had seemed. It was of the same gray-green concrete as the walls of the cave from which he had escaped, like a bird from an egg.

And here was another such thing, like an egg unhatched yet but already cracking, as the gouged-out pit on its surface near him testified. For a moment, the idea contained in the figure of speech staggered him, and then he was ripping away the concealing vines and dropping into the hole, reaching for a small plate pinned to an unharmed section nearby. It was a poor tool, but if Eve were trapped inside, needing help to break the shell, it would do.

"To you who may survive the holocaust, I, Simon Ames—" The words caught his eyes, drawing his attention to the plate in spite of his will, their terse strangeness pulling his gaze across them. "—dedicate this. There is no easy entrance, but you will expect no easy heritage. Force your way, take what is within, use it! To you who need it and will work for it. I have left all knowledge that was…"

Knowledge, Knowledge, forbidden by God! Satan had put before his path the unquestioned thing meant by the Tree of Knowledge symbol, concealed as a false egg, and he had almost been caught! A few minutes more—! He shuddered, and backed out, but optimism was freshening inside him again. Let it be the Tree! That meant this was really part of Eden, and being forewarned by God's marker, he had no fear for the wiles of Satan, alive or dead.

With long, loping strides he headed down the hill toward the meadows and woods, leaving the now useless boat behind. He would enter Eden on his own feet, as God had made him!

Half an hour later he was humming happily to himself as he passed beside lush fields, rich with growing things, along a little woodland path. Here was order and logic, as they should be. This was surely Eden!

And to confirm it came Eve! She was coming down the trail ahead, her hair floating behind, and some loose stuff draped over her hips and breasts, but the form underneath was Woman, beautiful and unmistakable. He drew back out of sight, suddenly timid and uncertain, only vaguely wondering how she came here before him. Then she was beside him, and he moved impulsively, his voice a whisper of ecstasy!

"Eve!"

"Oh, God! Dan! Dan!" It was a wild shriek that cut the air, and she was rushing away in panic, into the deeper woods. He shook his head in bewilderment, while his own legs began a more forceful pumping after her. He was almost upon her when he saw the serpent, alive and stronger than before!

But not for long! As a single gasp broke from her, one of his arms lifted her aside, while the other snapped out to pinch the fanged head completely off the body. His voice was gently reproving as he put her down. "You shouldn't have fled to the serpent, Eve!"

"To—ugh! But…you could have killed me before it struck!" The taut whiteness of fear was fading from her face, replaced by defiance and doubt.

"Killed you?"

"You're a robot! Dan!" Her words cut off as a brawny figure emerged from the underbrush, an ax in one hand and a magnificent dog at his heels. "Dan, he saved me…but he's a robot!"

"I saw, Syl. Steady! Edge this way, if you can. Good! They sometimes get passive streaks, I've heard. Shep!"

"Yeah, Dan?" The dog's thick growl answered, but his eyes remained glued to the robot.

"Get the people; just yell 'robot' and hike back. Okay, scram! You—what do you want?"

SA-10 grunted harshly, hunching his shoulders. "Things that don't exist! Companionship and a chance to use my strength and the science I know. Maybe I'm not supposed to have such things, but that's what I wanted!"

"Mmm. There are fairy stories about friendly robots hidden somewhere to help us, at that...We could use help. What's your name, and where from?"

Bitterness crept into the robot's voice as he pointed up river. "From the sunward side. So far, I've only found who I'm not!"

"So? Meant to get up there myself when the colony got settled." Dan paused, eying the metal figure speculatively. "We lost our books in the hell-years mostly, and the survivors weren't exactly technicians. So while we do all right with animals, agriculture, medicine and such, we're pretty primitive otherwise. If you really do know the sciences, why not stick around?"

The robot had seen too many hopes shattered like his clay man to believe wholly in this promise of purpose and companionship, but his voice caught as he answered. "You— want me?"

"Why not? You're a storehouse of knowledge, Say-Ten, and we—"

"Satan?"

"Your name—there on your chest." Dan pointed with his left hand, his body suddenly tense. "See? Right there!"

And now, as SA-10 craned his neck, the foul letters were visible, high on his chest! Ess, aye—

His first warning was the ax that crashed against his chest, to rock him back on his heels, and come driving down again, powered by muscles that seemed almost equal to his own. It struck again, and something snapped inside him. All the strength vanished, and he collapsed to the ground with a jarring crash, knocking his eyelids closed. Then he lay there, unable even to open them.

He did not try, but lay waiting almost eagerly for the final blows that would finish him. Satan, the storehouse of knowledge, tempter of men—the one person he had learned to hate! He'd come all this way to find a name and a purpose; now he had them! No wonder God had locked him away in a cave to keep him from men.

"Dead! That little fairy story threw him off guard." There was a tense chuckle from the man. "Hope his generator's still okay. We could heat every house in the settlement with that. Mmm...wonder where his hideout was?"

"Like the one up north with all the weapons hidden? Oh, Dan!" A strange smacking sound accompanied that, and then her voice sobered. "We'd better get back for help in hauling him."

Their feet moved away, leaving the robot still motionless but no longer passive. The Tree of Knowledge, so easily seen without the vine covering over the hole, was barely twenty miles away, and no casual search could miss it! He had to destroy it first!

But the little battery barely could maintain his consciousness, and the generator no longer served him. Delicate detectors were sending their messages through his nerves, assuring him it was functioning properly under automatic check, but beyond his control. Part of the senseless signaling device within him must have been defective, unless the baking of the clay man had somehow overloaded a part of it, and now it was completely wrecked, shorting aside all the generator control impulses, leaving him unable to move a finger.

Even when he blanked his mind almost completely out, the battery could not power his hands. His evil work was done; now he would heat their houses, while they sought the temptation he had offered them. And he could do nothing to stop it. God denied him the chance even to right the wrong he had done.

Bitterly he prayed on, while strange noises sounded near him and he felt himself lifted and carried bumpily at a rapid rate. God would not hear him! And at last he stopped, while the bumping went on to whatever end he was destined. Finally, even that stopped, and there were a few moments of absolute quiet.

"Listen! I know you still live!" It was a gentle, soothing voice, hypnotically compelling, that broke in on the dark swirls of his thoughts. Brief thoughts of God crossed his mind but it was a female voice, which must mean that one of the settlement women believed him and was trying to save him in secret. It came again. "Listen and believe me! You *can* move—a very, very little, but enough for me to see. Try to repair yourself, and let me be the strength in your hands. Try!...Ah, your arm!"

It was inconceivable that she could follow his imperceptible movements, and yet he felt his arm lifted and placed on his chest as the thought crossed his mind. But it was none of his business to question how or why. All his energy must be devoted to mustering his strength before the men could find the Tree!

"So—I turn this—this nut. And the other...There, the plate is off. What do I do now?"

That stopped him. His life force had been fatal to a pig, and probably would kill a woman. Yet she trusted him. He dared not move—but the idea must have been father to the act, for his fingers were brushed aside and her arms scraped over his chest, to be followed by an instant flood of strength pouring through him.

Her fingers had slipped over his eyes, but he did not need them as he ripped the damaged receiver from its welds and tossed it aside. Now there was worry in her voice, over the crooning cadence she tried to maintain. "Don't be too surprised at what you may see. Everything's all right!"

"Everything's all right!" he repeated dutifully, lingering over the words as his voice sounded again in his ears. For a moment more, while he reaffixed his plate, he let her hold his eyes closed. "Woman, who are you?"

"Eve. Or at least, Adam, those names will do for us." And the fingers withdrew, though she remained out of sight behind him.

But there was enough for him to see. In spite of the tiers of bookcases and film magazines, the machines, and the size of the laboratory, this was plainly the double of his own cave, circled with the same concrete walls! That could only mean the Tree!

With a savage lurch, he was facing his rescuer, seeing another robot, smaller, more graceful, and female in form, calling to all the hunger and loneliness he had known! But those emotions had betrayed him before, and he forced them back bitterly. There could be no doubt while the damning letters spelled out her name. Satan was male and female, and Evil had gone forth to rescue its kind!

Some of the warring hell of emotions must have shown in his movements, for she was retreating before him, her hands fumbling to cover the marks at which he stared. "Adam, no! The man read it wrong—dreadfully wrong. It's not a name. We're machines, and all machines have model numbers, like these. Satan wouldn't advertise his name. And I never had evil intentions!"

"Neither did I!" He bit the words out, stumbling over the objects on the floor as he edged her back slowly into a blind alley, while striving to master his own rebellious emotions at what he must do. "Evil must be destroyed! Knowledge is forbidden to men!"

"Not all knowledge! Wait, let me finish! Any condemned person has a right to a few last words…It was the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. God called it that! And He had to forbid them to eat, because they couldn't know which was the good. Don't you see, He was only protecting them until they were older and able to choose for themselves! Only Satan gave them evil fruit—hate and murder—to ruin them. Would you call healing the sick, good government, or improving other animals evil?

That's knowledge, Adam, glorious knowledge God wants man to have... Oh, damn it, can't you see?"

For a second as she read his answer, she turned to flee; then, with a little sobbing cry, she was facing him again, unresisting. "All right, murder me! Do you think death frightens me after being imprisoned here for six hundred years with no way to break free? Only get it over with!"

Surprise and the sheer audacity of the lie held his hands as his eyes darted from the atomic excavator to a huge drill, and a drum marked as explosives. And yet—even that cursory glance could not overlook the worn floor and thousand marks of age long occupation, though the surface of the dome had been unbroken a few hours before. Reluctantly, his eyes swung back to the excavator, and hers followed.

"Useless! The directions printed on it say to move the thing marked 'Orifice Control' to zero before starting. It can't be moved!"

She stopped, abruptly speechless, as his fingers lifted the handle from the ratchet and spun it easily back to zero! Then she was shaking her head in defeat and lifting listless hands to help him with the unfastening of her chest plate. There was no color left in her voice.

"Six hundred years because I didn't lift a handle! Just because I have absolutely no conception of mechanics, while all men have some instinct for it, which they take for granted They'd have mastered these machines in time and learned to read meaning into the books I memorized without even understanding the titles. But I'm like a dog tearing at a door, with a simple latch over his nose...Well, that's that. Good-by, Adam!"

But perversely, now that the terminals lay before him, he hesitated. After all, the instructions had not mentioned the ratchet; it was too obvious to need mention, but...He tried to picture such ignorance, staring at one of the Elementary Radio books above him. *Application of a Cavity Resonator.* Mentally, he could realize that a non-science translation was meaningless: Use of a sound producer or strengthener in a hole! And then the overlooked factor struck him.

"But you did get out!"

"Because I lost my temper and threw the pickax. That's how I found the blade, not the handle was metal. The only machines I could use were the projector and typer I was meant to use—and the typer broke!"

"Umm." He picked up the little machine, noting the yellowed incomplete page still in it, even as he slipped the carriage tension cord back on its hook. But his real attention was devoted to the cement dust ground into the splintered handle of the pick.

No man or robot could be such a complete and hopeless dope, and yet he no longer doubted. She was a robot moron! And if knowledge were evil, then surely she belonged to God! All the horror of his contemplated murder vanished, leaving his mind clean and weak before the relief that flooded him as he motioned her out.

"All right, you're not evil. You can go."

"And you?"

And himself? Before, as Satan, her arguments would have been plausible, and he had discounted them. But now—it *had* been the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil! And yet…

"Dogs!" She caught at him, dragging him to the entrance where the baying sound was louder. "They're hunting you, Adam—dozens of them!"

He nodded, studying the distant forms of men on horseback, while his fingers busied themselves with a pencil and scrap of paper. "And they'll be here in twenty minutes. Good or evil, they must not find what's here. Eve, there's a boat by the river; pull the red handle the way you want to go, hard for fast, a light pull for slow, Here's a map to my cave, and you'll be safe there."

Almost instantly, he was back at the excavator and in its saddle, his fingers flashing across its panel; its heavy generator bellowed gustily, and the squat, heavy machine began twisting through the narrow aisles and ramming obstructions aside. Once outside, where he could use its full force without danger of backwash, ten minutes would leave only a barren hill; and the generator could be overdriven by adjustment to melt itself and the machine into useless slag.

"Adam!" She was straddling into the saddle behind him, shouting over the roar of the thin blade of energy that was enlarging the tunnel.

"Go on, get away, Eve! You can't stop me!"

"I don't want to—they're not ready for such machines as this, yet! And between us, we can rebuild everything here, anyhow. Adam?"

He grunted uneasily, unable to turn away from the needle beam. It was hard enough trying to think without her distraction, knowing that he dared not take chances and must destroy himself, while her words and the instincts within him fought against his resolution. "You talk too much!"

"And I'll talk a lot more, until you behave sensibly! You'll make your mind sick, trying to decide now; come up the river for six months with me. You can't do any harm there, even if you are Satan! Then, when you've thought it over, Adam, you can do what you like. But not now!"

"For the last time, will you go?" He dared not think now, while he was testing his way through the flawed, cracked cement, and yet he could not quiet his mind to her words that went on and on. "GO!"

"Not without you! Adam, my receiver isn't defective; I knew you'd try to kill me when I rescued you! Do you think I'll give up so easily now?"

He snapped the power to silence with a rude hand, flinging around to face her. "You knew—and still saved me? Why?"

"Because I needed you, and the world needs you. You had to live, even if you killed me!"

Then the generator roared again, knifing its way through the last few inches, and he swung out of the dome and began turning it about. As the savage bellow of full power poured out of the main orifice, he turned his head to her and nodded.

She might be the dumbest robot in creation, but she was also the sweetest. It was wonderful to be needed and wanted!

And behind him, Eve nodded to herself, blessing Simon Ames for listing psychology as a humanity. In six months, she could complete his reeducation and still have time to recite the whole of the Book he knew as a snatch of film. But not yet! Most certainly not Leviticus yet; Genesis would give her trouble enough.

It was wonderful to be needed and wanted!

Spring had come again, and Adam sat under one of the budding trees, idly feeding one of the new crop of piglets as Eve's hands moved swiftly, finishing what were to be his clothes, carefully copied from those of Dan.

They were almost ready to go south and mingle with men in the task of leading the race back to its heritage. Already the yielding plastic he had synthesized and she had molded over them was a normal part of them, and the tiny magnetic muscles he had installed no longer needed thought to reveal their emotions in human expressions. He might have been only an uncommonly handsome man as he stood up and went over to her.

"Still hunting God?" she asked lightly, but there was no worry on her face. The metaphysical binge was long since cured.

A thoughtful smile grew on his face as he began donning the clothes. "He is still where I found Him—Something inside us that needs no hunting. No, Eve, I was wishing the other robot had survived. Even though we found no trace of his dome where your records indicated, I still feel he should be with us."

"Perhaps he is, in spirit, since you insist robots have souls. Where's your faith, Adam?"

But there was no mockery inside her. Souls or not, Adam's God had been very good to them.

* * *

And far to the south, an aged figure limped over rubble to the face of a cliff. Under his hands, a cleverly concealed door open, and he pushed inward, closing and barring it behind him, and heading down the narrow tunnel to a rounded cavern at its end. It had been years since he had been there, but the place was still home to him as he creaked down onto a bench and began removing tattered, travel-stained clothes. Last of all, he pulled a mask and gray wig from his head, to reveal the dented and worn body of the third robot.

He sighed wearily as he glanced at the few tattered books and papers he had salvaged from the ruinous growth of stalagmites and stalactites within the chamber, and at the corroded switch the unplanned dampness had shorted seven hundred before. And finally, his gaze rested on his greatest treasure. It was faded, even under the plastic cover, but the bitter face of Simon Ames still gazed out in recognizable form.

The third robot nodded toward it with a strange mixture of old familiarity and ever-new awe. "Over two thousand miles in my condition, Simon Ames, to check on a story I heard in one of the colonies, and months of searching for them. But I had to know. Well, they're good for the world. They'll bring all the things I couldn't, and their thoughts are young and strong, as the race is young and strong."

For a moment, he stared about the chamber and to the tunnel his adapted bacteria had eaten toward the outside world, resting again on the picture. Then he cut off the main generator and settled down in the darkness.

"Seven hundred years since I came out to find man extinct on the earth," he told the picture. "Four hundred since I learned enough to dare attempt his recreation, and over three hundred since the last of my superfrozen human ova grew to success. Now I've done my part. Man has an unbroken tradition back to your race, with no knowledge of the break. He's strong and young and fruitful, and he has new leaders, better than I could ever be alone. I can do no more for him!"

For a moment there was only the sound of his hands sliding against metal, and then a faint sigh. "Into my hands, Simon Ames, you gave your race. Now, into Thy Hands, God of that race, if You exist as my brother believes, I commend him—and my spirit."

Then there was a click as his hands found the switch to his generator, and final silence.

No Head for My Bier

It's true that the television industry has been making offers of a billion or so to lease rights to Claudius the Cat, but you'll still be a fool to rush out for that big-screen set. The movie boys still remember the days before Valentine August lost his face, when they were worrying about TV putting them out of business. And now that the tax on reserved-in-advance admissions to Claudius the Cat films has paid off the national debt…well, what's a billion or two?

It just goes to show that the beer in Brooklyn is worth a little loss of face. Any sailor will tell you lots of things get lost after beer in Brooklyn. But this time it was different; it happened to Valentine August, whose face was Colossal's fortune; and Valentine lost his face—not to mention his head—before the beer.

Naturally, Valentine August wasn't thinking of that—since he didn't know what was coming, mercifully—as the stratoliner drew in toward New York. He was thinking of the thirty-eight New York Valentine August Fan Clubs; mostly he was thinking of No. 32, where on his last visit the vice-president had kissed him—with loose bridgework that slipped and bit him. Valentine sighed. He was not fond of New York, and definitely doubtful of the dental skill of the technicians patronized by the members. He hated all premieres, even the gala one scheduled for his latest, *Compose Yourself, Arthur.* And then there was that nut, Professor Coma, who kept sending him threatening letters from some place in Brooklyn.

If Lorelei Lee hadn't gone east for the premiere, he'd have stayed home and gone on a binge. But as the writer of the opus, she was already in New York. And in addition to being the best script writer for Colossal, she was so lovely that after one look at her, Valentine found it difficult to reconcile himself to kissing Lana Turner, Hedy Lamarr and the other cookies he ran across in his movie-making.

He sighed, and reached for his handkerchief, just as something dropped out of nowhere into his hand. There was writing on it, short and not too sweet:

"Valentine August, you are a ham and the bane of all lovers of cinematic art. If I were not a tenderhearted man, I should eliminate you. (Signed) Prof. Graham Coma."

Valentine made short sounds, loud enough to wake up his producer in the next seat. Joe Epic looked up, snorted, and made the nasty sort of noise only a producer can make.

"You still mooning over Lorelei Lee?"

Valentine forgot the note at her name. All his troubles came trooping back. While he'd stared at her golden hair, tiny tip-tilted nose, and wide, upslanting eyes, barely resisting the temptation to howl like a wolf, she'd made comments. She'd claimed she'd vote the Academy Award to any alley cat in preference to him. She'd indicated he was half of America's favorite breakfast, the other half being eggs; and that he'd caused the rebirth of vaudeville. She mentioned that his strangely dry, learned voice was a fine thing to hear, but as romantic as cold ravioli on soggy toast. She'd given him the name of a school that taught plumbing.

"No, Joe," Valentine answered. "I'm not mooning over her. Just wondering when we arrive...Did I tell you she went out and picked up an alley cat—the meanest, biggest tomcat she could get? And named it July, because that always comes before August?"

Joe Epic grunted. "Tell me about it sometime. Trouble with you, Valentine, is you let her walk on you. What you should do, see; is grab her, hold her, and kiss her young head off. And take that paper outa your hair."

Joe went back to sleep as Valentine felt his head and pulled out the note, absent-mindedly. Valentine the gentleman...or August, the caveman? Lorelei had never seen the savage, primitive August—but she was going to.

His eye found the writing on the note: "P. S. I am not a tenderhearted man. (Signed) Coma."

Now how did that get there?

The paper in his hand gave a wiggle and vanished, to be replaced by another message, still shorter.

"Teleportation, you dope. Coma."

Valentine August, caveman, hesitated in front of Lorelei's door. Maybe the hotel clerk had pocketed his money and announced him, anyway; maybe she wouldn't answer; maybe she'd gone out. He brought up a savage, primitive fist, hesitated, and tapped his fingernails against the wood. Then the door opened.

Lorelei stood there, wearing something blue and clinging, and staring at the floor, before she brought her eyes up with the light fading out of them. Valentine was suddenly breathless and strangely hot and cold, like someone who had just swallowed an acetylene torch and an ice cube.

He gulped. "Lorelei," he mewled, "I-ah-mmm..." The acetylene torch was winning.

Lorelei's shoulders drooped. "Oh, it's you. I thought it was July—he's been missing two days. I was hoping…But I should have known you'd be here for the premiere. Well—come in, I suppose."

She made a point of selecting a chair that barely held her, and he slumped on the couch nearby. There was a short silence.

Valentine broke it finally. "I didn't come for the premiere, Lorelei."

"Didn't you?"

"You know I didn't," said Valentine. "I hate premieres." He looked at her. "I came to New York because you were here."

"Oh?" said Lorelei.

"You don't have to get nasty about it," Valentine said, detecting a curious note in her voice. There was a picture of a huge tiger-striped tomcat on the wall beside her, and that, he felt, was bad enough. There was no reason to add insult to injury.

"I wasn't getting nasty. I just said 'Oh?'."

"That's just it—just 'Oh?'," Valentine said. "If Juliet had treated Romeo that way, he'd have set fire to the balcony. Why, your attitude toward me is so well known that even though we've talked together on the set three times, not a single columnist has announced we're secretly married."

"I—know," Lorelei said. "I guess I've been a little rude."

"Rude isn't the word," said Valentine, pushing his point and wondering if the caveman line was working already. "You're calling the atom bomb a firecracker. You should be ashamed of yourself."

Lorelei stared at the floor. "I know. Since somebody stole July, I've been thinking of him—and you. It's not as though I really disliked you…"

"What!" Valentine's heart developed a sudden return to enthusiasm for its work. "What did you say?" he asked, stifling a few hymns.

Lorelei's voice was small and meek. "I don't really dislike you."

Sharp, succinct Anglo Saxon tetraliterals were on the tip of Valentine's tongue, struggling to get ahead of the hymns, but he stifled these, too. He leaped to his feet, lifted Lorelei from her chair savagely and held her before him, digging primitive fingers into her slim shoulders.

"You monstrous young horror! The nerve of you—treating me like a leper for weeks, and then telling me cool as a snub-nosed cucumber that you don't really dislike me." He lifted her into the air, placed her on the couch, and settled beside her. "All right, start talking. I want to know all, and unless you're angling for the spanking you deserve, it had better be good."

Lorelei looked up at him. her sweet, beautiful face troubled. "It's—I guess it's—your face," she said.

"My face!" Valentine groaned. "Everything else, and now you come to that. For Pete's sake, you told me last time my face was all that kept me in pictures—without it, I'd have less fan appeal than Karloff's socks."

"That's just it," Lorelei explained. "It's a good face—too good. The kind of face sculptors try to put on statues of Greek gods—Stop smirking!"

"That," said Valentine, "wasn't a smirk. It was a tender smile. And what's wrong with a face like that?"

"It keeps you in pictures!" She leaned forward earnestly, so close her lips were almost on his, and only a mighty effort and his curiosity kept him from giving in to impulse. But she was speaking again. "Don't you see? I gave up writing fiction and turned to films because—I've always felt that motion pictures had an unlimited future. I wanted to write good stories, help fine actors further the motion picture art, bring it to maturity. And then—then they assign me to writing scripts for you!"

Valentine couldn't see anything wrong with that, but he was still dazzled by the nearness of her, so he nodded and made no comment.

She went on. "What advances the art? Great acting and the appreciation of great acting. And just when the moviegoers begin thinking about performances instead of looks, you come along—with no ability, nothing but a a face! And people forget all about acting and begin to trample each other after your pictures."

"You know," said Valentine suspiciously, "you sound exactly like Professor Coma. He says I've set motion pictures back ten years."

"He's conservative. Why, you've made it unfashionable to be a good actor. Why Rodney Royce and Martin Martin—both good actors, too, or they were—spend all their time in beauty parlors, and they're turning into hams. And Monroe Muck had to retire when the surgeon told him it would take a magician instead of a plastic surgeon. Can't you see why I feel the way I do?"

Valentine got to his feet. "No," he said. "I'll be damned if I can."

Joe Epic had been right. He shouldn't have listened. He should have acted. "Motion pictures are fine, Lorelei. But emotion fixtures are more important—and mine are plenty fixed. I'm tired of this—darned tired."

He grinned down at her, and then with a sudden movement, August the caveman swept her to her feet and drew her close to him.

"Wait," she said a little breathlessly. "Don't—please don't. What I've said may not mean anything to you—but it means a lot to me…"

Valentine was too far gone for arbitration. "Nuts!" he said, quietly. He kissed her, hard, long, fiercely. It was the grandfather of all kisses—a kiss he had saved up for a long time. He was floating on cloud seven…

Then her hands were on his chest, pushing him away. Her eyes were filled with cold fury. "Get out!"

He blinked. "But, listen, I—"

"Get out!"

He stood there uncertainly for a moment, not knowing what to say or do—dull pain within him at the old familiar expression on her face, and a good portion of self-disgust. Then he went out to find a brick wall, so that he could beat his head against it.

Valentine August never did know what happened during the next four hours, though he had a vague idea of dropping dimes in turnstiles, changing trains at the end of the line, crossing platforms, and other mechanical operations. He didn't know why he'd gone into the subway in the first place; he hated the clatter and stuffiness. All he could remember clearly was the fury on Lorelei Lee's face, and that was what he wanted to forget.

Finally, though, something made him look down at his hands, to see another note. It vanished as he looked at it, but he'd had time to make out the words: "So you're a ham in private life, too. That was an abominable performance, wasn't it? Coma."

He threw a glance around, but the nearest seat was occupied by a sailor sleeping off a jag, and the only other person in the car was an old woman reading a paper and disagreeing violently at the top of her voice with what she read. Valentine felt the train slowing, took another breath of the foul air, and made for the door.

He came out on loneliness and desolation, and his reverie took him deeper into the unknown, where the sidewalks turned to dirt roads, and the street lights grew fewer and fewer. This was the Flatbush section of Brooklyn, where visitors carry canteens and K rations. They used to send out search parties to rescue travelers there, but they've given that up—too many search parties were lost and never heard of again. But that didn't bother Valentine and his gloom.

It was only after he'd gone fifteen minutes without seeing a street light that he awoke to the fact he had no idea of how to get back. He lit a match, but there were no street signs, and it went out quickly in the smog. Another did no better.

"Damn," said Valentine to himself. "Wish there was a light."

Something huge and dazzling, like a dragon's eye, swished into his face, and he leaped three feet into the air.

"Well!" a male voice said quietly. "Mr. Valentine August!"

"Very nearly the late Valentine August," said Valentine, settling to earth. "Do you always scare people out of ten years' growth?"

"You *did* ask for a light," the voice pointed out. "I was merely acceding to your request."

Valentine stared over the rays of the flashlight, but he could see nothing. "But I said that to *myself*."

"I read your mind, of course," the man said. He laughed, a thin, braying snicker that ran up and down Valentine's back like a platoon of icicles. The flashlight flicked upwards to reveal a face that was almost all nose. "Naturally. I'm Coma—Alexander Graham Coma. Twenty seven degrees, but you wouldn't know what they meant."

"Coma! Then you're the man…"

"Precisely," said Coma. "I'm the man who brought you here."

"Brought me?" Valentine asked. "I wandered here purely by accident."

"Tch, tch, tch." Coma's nose wagged emphatically from side to side. "Simple long distance hypnotism. I do not permit chance events to enter my schemes!"

Valentine looked into the rays of the light, regretting that Coma was not dressed in a jacket featuring sleeves tied in back. This was rapidly turning into a hard day. He sighed. "As you say, Professor. And now—what next?"

"I shall take your picture," Coma told him thoughtfully. He studied Valentine carefully, and shook his head. "I must, you know. I made up my mind last week…As I mentioned in my first letters, I've always been sure of the brilliant future of movies, certain that even the behavior of certain performers could never vitiate the talents of the great screen actors."

"Very true," Valentine agreed. "But why take my pic…"

"Last week I saw a double feature. *The Bad Sky* with Paul Muni and something with you—*Relax, Max*, I think. I suffered through your film, then gloried through the brilliant work of Muni, with tears of pure pleasure coursing down these sunken cheeks."

"They're not sunken," Valentine said. "It's just your nose…"

"Don't interrupt," Coma said crossly. "After the show, I listened to the conversation in the lobby. Did they rave over my hero? No! All they discussed was your face! The only time Muni was mentioned was when one fool said that *Looney*—the ignominy of it!—resembled a barber he'd known as a boy in Irkutsk! It was too much. Your face—or Muni's genius? I went home, set to work—and invented this." He turned the rays of his flashlight on something that looked like a folding camera. Valentine leaned forward and realized that it was the kind of camera a surrealist might paint when very drunk, or Salvatore Dali when cold sober.

Suddenly Coma raised it, pointed it at Valentine, and whirled a knob on it. There was a flash of—something—and Valentine was yanked forward violently. His head was on fire and he couldn't see. He felt as though a mule with phosphorescent hooves had kicked him in the face.

The calm voice of Coma drifted through the mist. "I've just taken your face, August. Where an ordinary camera takes a negative image of film, my camera takes the positive subject itself. I've taken it by electromagnetically negative light, transducing the positively electromagnetic mass instantaneously onto the colloidal microplenar cube which I've compressed along one dimension into a film. Naturally, the matter has been replaced with electromagnetically negative mass, which behaves exactly opposite within the spectrum from positive mass-transmits light perfectly, instead of reflecting it. You understand, of course?"

He waited, and received no answer. Valentine was making gulping motions. Coma went on. "It needn't be permanent, but you've lost your face—and head—to all intents and purposes. You can still eat, chew, drink, and so on. But until this film is developed, you have no face. Then, of course, the positive mass dissolves and will automatically seek out and replace the negative mass, bringing you back to normal…You have one month, August. Succeed in that time without your face, and I'll return it to you. Fail, and I destroy the film. One month!"

Abruptly the flashlight clicked off, and Coma was gone.

Valentine began to walk forward, like a baby taking his first steps. The mist was beginning to clear before him, leaving the night's crisp blackness, but pain like hot lava still flowed through his head. Then, after a time, that vanished.

The long-nosed escapee from a Karloff film had done something to him, no doubt about that. His talk had been padded-cell matter, but something had happened. Maybe the camera had sprayed acid…

Valentine began running. Somewhere, street lights appeared, and a little butcher store. Valentine lit a match with shaking fingers and looked at his reflection in the store-window.

His beautifully cut blue suit was there, with the dark blue coat over it. His light-blue shirt was there, and his dark blue tie. His shoes were there, and his socks. Everything was there, with one exception.

He had no head.

As anyone who has tried it can tell you, a man who suddenly finds himself minus head is in a spot. He cannot proceed to his home or hotel to think about it, because that involves passing people; and people, generally, react unfavorably to headless men. He cannot stay where he is, because people will pass sooner or later, no matter where he is.

Valentine staggered along, not quite sure where he was headed—or unheaded. He staggered on until the lights of an all-night drug-store loomed up before him. Cautiously, he peered inside.

The place was empty, except for one clerk, who sat at the back of the store happily reading a book by Philip St. John. There was a string of telephone booths just inside the doorway. Valentine jerked open the door and leaped into a booth. The clerk looked up, saw the booth door close, and went back to his book. It was one of those books.

Valentine dialed Lorelei's hotel and swore at the clerk. Then there was a pause, and Lorelei's voice said, "Hello?"

"Don't hang up," Valentine said quickly. "This is Valentine. Remember you objected to my face—well, could you—ah—care for me, if…Lorelei, I don't have a face. And I'm in a jam. Does my voice sound hollow?"

There was a short silence. "No," Lorelei said finally, and it sounded like an answer to both questions. "Why should your voice sound hollow except that it comes from your head?"

"I just thought it might," Valentine said morosely. "You see, uh—I mean—Lorelei, I'm not talking through a mouth."

There was another pause. "You're drunk," Lorelei said. Valentine gripped the phone tighter. "I'm not drunk, I swear I'm not. I was just walking in Brooklyn and some long-nosed guy took a picture, and my face disappeared, and…"

"Valentine!"

"Listen, you've got to believe me. I've got to see you, talk to you. How'm I going to get along without a head?"

"Try using your feet," Lorelei said, her voice fading into something about "Drunk as Bacchus." There was a sharp click at her end of the line.

"Wait!" Valentine cried. "Wait! You've got to…" His voice trailed off, and he hung up. What was he going to do now?

He saw a shadow on the booth door and turned to see the clerk approaching, an unlighted cigarette in his hand—obviously about to ask for a match. Valentine tried to shrink into the shadows, but it was no good. The clerk peered through the glass and saw him.

"Gooooo!" The clerk stood there paralyzed, and his knees began to buckle. Then they straightened. "Gooo-oo-oooo!" The clerk whirled and streaked through the door. He did not bother to open it.

Valentine shrugged, started out, and then turned to the back of the store. He found bandages on the shelves, opened them, and began to mummify the section of air which would normally house his face. The bandages wrapped around the air in the exact form his head would have had. He cut two circular chunks away for his eyes, appropriated some dark glasses, shoved the earpieces between the bandages, into position, and surveyed the results in a mirror.

It wasn't bad. He looked like a man who had worn an orange tie at a St. Patrick's day clambake, but he might have been human.

There was no point in lingering. The clerk was probably out looking for moral support to return, and someone might happen along at any moment. Valentine walked to the frame of the front door and jerked it open. There was a startled, muffled "Goo!" and he heard footsteps running. Valentine ran in the other direction. After a while he reached a subway and approached the agent for information on getting back. The agent looked at his bandaged head with a bored eye and told him.

Only a local was running at that hour, and it seemed to stop at every station, backtrack, and stop at several a second time, but it finally got him home. He hesitated then. His original idea had been to sleep over it, but there was no point in wasting time. He headed for Joe Epic's room.

Epic held his contract and made money from his pictures. It was up to him to protect his investment.

Epic opened the door, did a double-take, and there were dollar signs being erased in his eyes. "Help!"

"Control yourself, Joe," Valentine said. "Let's go inside and I'll tell you all about it."

They sat down opposite each other, Epic still staring at Valentine's bandages and groaning. "Well, what happened? What did you do to yourself?"

"I didn't do anything," Valentine said. "Joe, can you take it?"

Epic groaned again. "After seeing you like that, I can stand anything."

Valentine began to unravel the bandages. He kept the glasses in front of the eye-holes until the last moment, then pulled the disguise away in one sweep. Epic stared at him, his eyes bulging in terror. Then he leaped gracefully over a nearby couch and crouched, shivering, behind it.

"For heaven's sake! Joe!" Valentine said disgustedly. He walked behind the couch.

Epic began to shuffle away on his hands and knees, not looking out. "Go away, dead man," he said. "I never harmed anyone. Maybe a few widows and orphans and rival producers once in a while, but nothing serious. Please go away—please."

Valentine grunted disgustedly. "I'm as alive as you are—more, the way you look now. Some man took a picture of me with a new camera, and it made my face invisible."

Trick camera effects was Epic's language. He got slowly to his feet, ran a hand shakily across his forehead, and said, "Let's hear."

Valentine told the story, including Coma's month in which to test him.

When he finished, Epic was grinning again.

"Nothing to it," Epic said. "We'll announce you've been in an automobile accident and had a head injury, but you'll go on working in bandages. It'll be good publicity for a while—you'll be a success, and the inventor will give your face back. How's that?"

"That," said Valentine, "stinks. Coma's crazy, not dumb. He'll see through it. And we can't set up some executive job with a friend's firm, either; he'd find it was a fraud. Somehow, I've got to be a success legitimately—and without a head!"

They sat in silence. Valentine went through three cigarettes—they still tasted the same—and Epic went through his fingernails and started on his knuckles.

Finally Valentine said cheerfully, "Well, Joe, we'll have to use your plan, I guess, even if my face is gone for good. My contract runs three years, and I'll just have to earn my keep."

Epic's voice was suddenly as cheerful. "Valentine," he said, "Can you take it? Because I'm tossing you over."

"Are you crazy?"

"Nope, just sane. Remember *Go Slow, Joe*? Big scene, thousands of extras at $7.50 a day, cameras taking you riding your horse, money right and left—and you smiled into the cameras and said, 'Wish they'd give me a softer horse.' And what did I do—had the scene made over, and called it high spirits.

"Or *Take a Break, Jake*? Olga Stalingrad, all the way from Russia, highest salary, expensive build-up. So she was temperamental, and we warned you. Comes the big love scene, you bend down to kiss her—then you drop her and say, 'Is that nose real, or are you doubling for a parrot?' She goes to M.G.M., and we lose a big investment. But I smile like a father and figure you got some sense of humor.

"Or *Keep Cool-a, Caligula*. Big expensive chariot race scene, you supposed to be clenching your teeth and muttering. So thirty lip readers write in, claiming you spoil the illusion by saying, 'I'll take a Chewy.' And now no lip-readers go to Colossal-Epic theatres. So I shrug my shoulders, lose some money, and figure you deserve a good time.

"All that I forgive, Valentine. But a dozen times I begged you should let me insure your face for a million, and you figure it's just a gag and turn thumbs down. Losing a million, that I can't forgive! You're through, August!"

Valentine got to his feet slowly. "Aren't you forgetting our contract?"

"You're forgetting it, Valentine," Epic said, a hard smile on his face. "Some sense of humor you got. When we sign you up at 3 G a week, you laughed so much over all the 'face' publicity you had your face put under contract—not you. We're used to screwballs, so we agreed. So—no face, no contract. Tomorrow, I tear it up."

Valentine stood for a moment, wondering. Then he shrugged. It was true enough. He'd had a good time at Epic's expense; now that he was in trouble, he couldn't expect the producer to worry about getting him out of it.

He replaced the bandages and glasses, then turned and went out of the door.

The thing to do was get the film from Coma and develop it. Success without a head—well, people have a prejudice against hiring men without heads.

Valentine took the subway. He'd always had a good memory for odors, and the right station had an unusually sour smell. He got off and went out, to see grey streaks beginning in the sky. It would be light soon. He walked rapidly in the direction of the road where he'd met Coma, skirting the all-night drugstore carefully.

He found the spot, all right—footmarks still showed where he'd jumped. There were wide, empty lots for blocks around. Hanging around wouldn't do him any good. He walked back toward civilization.

A milkman driving a horse and wagon clattered down the street. Valentine waved an arm, and the man stopped. He didn't seem excited about the bandages—but then, this was Brooklyn.

"What's on your mind, Charlie?" the milkman asked.

"I'm trying to locate a man named Coma—Professor Coma. Man with a nose like one of your milk bottles."

The milkman thought it over. "Beats me," he said. "There ain't no Coma on my route, and I don't remember no schnoz like you tell. You sure he lives around here?"

"No," Valentine admitted. "That's just it. I met him here, but I don't know where he lives. Well, thanks anyhow."

"Anytime, Charlie," the milkman said. He started off, then stopped the horse. "Say, tell you what you do. Inquire in that grocery down the street.

Owner knows everything about everybody around here. He don't open for an hour, though."

"I'll wait," Valentine decided. "Thanks again."

He started to walk down the block.

"Hey, Charlie," the milkman said.

"Yes?"

"This guy Coma. He the guy that walloped up your face like that?"

"No," Valentine said. "It got caught between two ferry boats."

The milkman nodded wisely. "Same thing happened to me once. Well, hope you find him."

Just after six o'clock, a little, sharp-faced man came hurrying up to the store, a set of keys in his hand. He stopped at sight of Valentine and moved back a step.

"No harm meant, friend," Valentine said. "I'm just trying to locate an old friend, and the milkman said you'd know where he is."

"Oh," the little man said, expelling a deep breath. "Oh. This friend of yours—what's his name?"

"Coma," Valentine said. "Professor Alexander Graham Coma. He's a little fellow with a big nose."

"Coma? Coma? Nope, mister—there's no Coma around here."

"Are you sure of that?"

"Look, mister." the little man said with dignity. "This is the only grocery in the entire neighborhood. Used to be another, but he sold cheap stuff and went outa business. We carry only the best—everything fresh. Well, there's no Coma. If he lives in the neighborhood, he eats—and if he eats, he'd trade here."

"I see," Valentine said. "Much obliged."

That seemed to settle that. Then Valentine shrugged. He went into a little candy store, flipped open the Brooklyn telephone book, and looked under the C's. Coma was listed.

Valentine asked directions from the man behind the counter, then found the place three blocks away. It was a cottage, separated from a string of identical cottages by a large lot. Valentine knocked. No answer. He knocked again. Still no answer. Finally he tried the knob, and the door swung open.

He entered a long hall and looked around. There was a faint glimmer of light in a room at the back, and he walked toward it. The door was open.

Coma stood in front of a table heaped with bottles, glasses, and shallow trays. The shades were drawn.

"Well," said Coma, without looking up. "Come in, Mr. August, come in."

Valentine walked in.

"You were foolish to ask the milkman and the grocer," Coma said. "I gave up eating two years ago. Filthy habit. Get energy right out of the air easier."

Valentine lifted an eyebrow. "I suppose you saw everything from here?"

"Naturally. Telescopic X-Ray vision. Learned that years ago, before I took up serious work."

"Listen, Coma," Valentine began. Then he choked. There was a stack of films in plain view on the table. "Uh, er—I've come here to plead with you. How can I succeed without a head? Who'd hire me? I mean besides you?"

"I can't say," Coma answered. "That's your trouble. I've made an experiment, and I intend to stick to it."

Valentine stared downward covertly. There was an envelope marked *V. August—head* lying on top of the table.

"All right," Valentine said hoarsely. "Forget it. I can see you won't change your mind." He leaned forward and said winningly, "But you can satisfy my curiosity about this invention. That won't hurt your experiment. How do you develop your films, for instance?"

The glint of the inventor appeared in Coma's eyes. "Umm, that shouldn't hurt. And it's so simple. Just pure alcohol. That dissolves the binding colloids, and the positive matter is automatically attracted to the opposite polarity of the same value. Positive is stronger than negative—so you're back to normal. Only it has to be absolutely pure alcohol. Otherwise, you get freak results—the congruity between that positive matter and its mate in negative form may be seriously imbalanced, and without proper valence, the loose positive matter might go anywhere. Like to see me do it—I've got some cat films I want to develop."

"Thanks," Valentine said. He lifted his fist and brought it down on the Professor's head, letting Coma sink gently to the floor. Valentine scooped up the envelope, and looked at the film. He couldn't tell. It was just a rather thick oblong piece of black celluloid. Still…

"Meaouw!" Something rubbed against his leg, and Valentine jumped. He looked down, as the rubbing continued, but there was nothing there. His fingers found soft fur, though, and he started to explore. One of the cats Coma had mentioned, probably.

But there was no time for that. He dropped the film into his pocket and left. Now for some pure alcohol.

But where? The drug-store where he'd stolen the bandages was the only one around, and that was out. And it would be torture to wait until he could get back up-town. The suspense would kill him. Then he grinned. There was a bar and grill down the block, with its door open, and a man in a dirty apron was sweeping some dirt into the street.

Bars sell alcoholic beverages; maybe there was some pure alcohol around. It was possible, considering the weird concoctions customers were always asking made up.

The man in the dirty apron looked Valentine over with dull eyes and went on sweeping.

"Up sort of late aren't you?" Valentine asked.

"Live behind the store," the man said, "Place ain't no goldmine. Why—any objections?"

"None at all," Valentine assured him. "I'm a potential customer. Do you happen to have any pure alcohol to sell?"

The man sighed. "I got ulcers, bum feet, bankruptcy, lousy stock and rheumatism. Now I got fool questions. You get that at a drugstore. Couple blocks down."

"I can't," Valentine said. "I—I have a phobia—pharmaceutophobia, it's called. Don't you have any pure alcohol around?"

The man shrugged. "Mister, I wouldn't be surprised. I even found a bottle of uncut whiskey yesterday. Go ahead and look around, if you want—but don't go sticking no bottles in your coat; I'm keeping my eye on you from here."

Valentine went behind the bar and began digging at the mountain-high piles of bottles. It was hot work, and heat was beginning to come up the pipes. Valentine peeled off his coat and jacket in five minutes, but it didn't help. Absent-mindedly, he reached up and began to unravel his bandages.

He did it while scanning the piles, and didn't realize they were off until he heard a siren-like howl from the doorway. He turned to see the store-owner staring at him, frozen to the broom.

"No head!" the bartender shrieked. "No head! He ain't got no head!" He shrieked once more and took off with the broom dragging between his legs. Valentine expected him to soar on it or fall over it, but he vanished in a haze of speed. Then Valentine went back to his digging.

It was still hot, and growing hotter. By the time he reached the bottom—with no pure alcohol in sight—he felt as if his invisible tongue were hanging out. He reached for the last bottle and scowled at it. It was beer, as far from pure alcohol as anything could be. He started to put it down—and then thought better of it.

He uncapped it expertly, placed it where his lips should be, and drank deeply. It tasted right, somehow. He excavated another beer and gave it the same treatment.

He was on his eighth bottle when he heard the door open. He snatched his bottle and crouched behind the counter, but it wasn't the owner. It was a tall, lean, red-headed man wearing evening dress, complete with tails. Valentine was only mildly surprised—he wasn't in a position to feel too critical of another's appearance.

He felt gay and adventurous by then. There was a newspaper on the counter, and he snatched it up into a position to conceal his lack of head. "What's yours, Charlie?" he asked, taking a note from the milkman:

"Open kinda early, aren't you?" asked the red-headed man, speaking with careful distinctness.

"Val's Bar and Grill is always open," Valentine answered, opening another bottle.

The red-headed man was impressed. "I hear sucking sounds. What you dinking?"

"Beer. Nice fresh, foamy beer."

"Beer. I'll have some," the man said. "I've tried rye, rum, scotch, anisette, gin, bourbon, absinthe, tequila, and port wine. Give me some beer."

Valentine gave him a bottle and they finished in a dead heat. Valentine opened two more, and then two more.

His mood was becoming playful by the fourteenth drink, though. With a quick movement, he dropped the newspaper and waited for his customer to shriek and rush out.

The red-headed man stared owlishly at him. "You haven't got a head," he said casually, finishing his beer. "Another beer."

"I certainly haven't," Valentine agreed sadly. He resisted a sudden impulse to weep. "What'll my friends back in Hollywood think when they hear about it?"

"You from Hollywood?" asked the red-headed man, pleased. He tried to slap Valentine fraternally on the shoulder, missed twice, and gave up. "I'm from Hollywood, too. Name's Design. Here on a vacation—drink too much in Hollywood. Used to live around here before I became a success."

Valentine disregarded him. "I haven't got a head," he said. "No head at all, no head at all." There was a song like that, but he couldn't remember it. He took the film from his pocket and placed it carefully on the bar. "You know, Design, my head's right in this film."

The red-headed man peered at the film. "Right in that film?"

"Right in it," said Valentine.

"I don't see any head," Design said.

"You're drunk, that's why," Valentine told him. "So drunk you don't even see my head in this film. Well, it's there, all right, and if I had some pure alcohol I'd prove it. Pure alcohol would make my head come right out of that film."

"Aw, forget it," the red-headed man said. "Probably isn't so hot to look at, anyhow. You've got a nice voice, though." He paused suddenly, his eyes open wide. "*Your voice!*" he howled thunderously.

Valentine jumped. "What's the matter with you?"

"But, your voice—don't you understand. It's the one I've been hunting over a year—and I didn't realize it until just now!" He didn't sound sober, but at least soberer. "Listen, you've got exactly the dignified, unemotional tone I want. Do you—do you have a job out in Hollywood?"

"Not at the moment," Valentine answered.

"Wonderful!" Design said. "Glorious! I can't believe my luck. Listen, how would you like to go to work—?" He paused suddenly, seeing that Valentine wasn't listening. "What are you doing?"

"I'm going to show you something," Valentine said. He took a cocktail glass filled with beer and handed it to Design. "I'll bet you the price of your drinks you can't balance that on one finger and sing Mammy at the same time."

Design looked annoyed for a moment, and then his sporting instinct got the better of him. "I'll take that bet," he said.

He placed the cocktail glass carefully on his index finger and began to sing. It went well for a while—until he arrived at the final "Ma-a-a-my." Then his arms swung out sentimentally and the glass flipped into the air and smashed on the bar. Beer flowed brownly in every direction.

Valentine laughed. "I knew it. Everybody does it. You just can't sing that part without sticking out your arms like Jolson. It happens every time."

He stopped suddenly and stared at the film. Design looked at it, too.

"I think we wet your film," he said.

Valentine steadied himself on the bar. He felt sick. "Beer. It—it isn't pure alcohol. The film's ruined…"

There was a flat silence. Valentine picked the film up, wiping it off as best he could. But there were two spots that were thoroughly damp. He shoved it glumly back into the envelope and into his pocket.

And the sharp, chilling whine of a bullet cut through his gloom. A sunrayed hole appeared in the mirror behind him! The store-owner stood in the rear, an ancient musket in his hands.

"I'm going to shoot you, nightmare," he said, grinning hideously at Valentine. "Maybe I'm nuts from drinking my own stock—but I'm gonna put a bullet through you. Then if you don't go away, I'm crazy."

He fired again, and another hole appeared in the mirror.

"Duck!" Valentine said. He pushed Design to the floor on the other side of the bar. Then carefully he filled a glass with beer and flipped it. Beer splashed into the store-owner's eyes. He dropped his musket and began to claw at his face.

"Let's go!" Valentine shouted, snatching up his disguise. He leaped from behind the bar, straight-armed the store-owner, and went through the door, with Design right behind him.

"No, you idiot!" Valentine shouted. "You go one way, I'll go the other. Scram!"

Design stopped running. "But your voice—how am I going to reach you?"

Valentine didn't answer. He didn't know what the man was talking about, and that didn't matter, anyway. Nothing much mattered when you got right down to it. But he was lucky. He ran almost a block without meeting anybody, then slipped into an alley and replaced his coverings. That done, he headed for the subway.

Lorelei answered the door, and Valentine didn't wait to be invited in. He pushed her inside and walked in after her.

"Look," he said. "In about an hour I'm going to be floating in the East River. But before I jump off a bridge, I've come to say goodbye and hold you in my arms. Go ahead and scream if you want, but now—come here!"

He reached for her. She didn't scream or attempt to slug him. Instead, her warmth clung to him.

"You've been hurt," she said. "I was so afraid—when I thought, I knew something would happen to you after you called up. I've been so worried. You sounded so drunk and helpless…"

"Lorelei," Valentine said gently, "I've been hurt, all right—but not after I called. This happened before. That's what I tried to tell you."

"Before you called? But it couldn't—you were so drunk, and…Oh, darling, I couldn't sleep—I was worrying about you so much. I knew then that I loved you—that I've always loved you."

Valentine felt as though a bomb had exploded inside him. spreading a wonderful, happy warmth all through him. She loved him—he'd just heard her say it. "Lorelei," he said, "everything I told you on the phone was true. Fantastic, but true. Stand back, honey."

It didn't take long. A flip, a twist and a twirl, and the bandages were off, freeing his lips. She didn't faint. She swayed a little, and her lovely face turned several delicate shades of pink and red, but she took it. Then she was in his arms, held close, and he was kissing her and thinking that even without a head this was a pretty wonderful world.

"It doesn't matter," Lorelei told him, when he finished his account. "There's nothing we can do about it, so it doesn't matter. You can wear bandages in public, and we'll still be happy together…"

She paused, and he looked at her questioningly. She hesitated, then went on. "Only…only neither of us has a job now, darling. Epic—well, he thinks I'm good only for writing scripts for you; and with you dropped… And I'll bet you haven't saved, either."

It brought him back to reality, he shook his head. "No. And getting a job in my condition…umm, some fellow wanted to hire me to today, though. Don't know what kind—he was probably just drunk. He kept talking about my voice…how been searching for it for a year, name was Design."

Lorelei stared at him. "Valentine!" she said. "Not *Dennis* Design?"

"I don't know. He didn't say. Tall good-looking fellow with red hair. Is he the man you're talking about?"

"Yes. honey, yes!" She kissed him excitedly. "Valentine, he's the head of Design Productions—the cartoon comedy tycoon. He probably wants you to play the voice of Claudius the Cat."

"Huh?"

"Haven't you heard of Claudius the Cat? They're to be full-length comedies—with a budget for each as big as an A production! Isn't it wonderful? You won't even need a face, darling!"

"Lovely," Valentine admitted doubtfully. "Only I don't know where Design is staying. And a cat—I never tried animal imitations. Maybe I can't meow."

"Then go ahead—try it," she said.

Valentine threw back his lack head, took a deep breath, and tried to think of fish, garbage cans, female felines. Then he meowed. It was a magnificent volume of sound—but no cat was ever going to recognize it. It was something between a bleat and a bray, with a Harvard accent.

Lorelei's shoulders drooped, he nodded glumly. Then she shrugged

"Maybe he won't need you to meow. Maybe they can dub it in. Anyhow, we can try. And Winchell will know where Design is."

She called while Valentine put his bandages. Design, it seemed was in the same hotel, on the second floor. She patted his bandages into better order, braced herself, and they left.

If it worked, it might not be bad. If he was doomed to a headless existence, he might as well make the most of it. Being Claudius the Cat was as pleasant a way of earning a living as any. But those meows—he practiced a few more on the way down, and they were a little better, he fancied. But the elevator man looked on them with faint approval, and Lorelei's face wasn't happy.

Design answered their knock without enthusiasm, holding his head. Lorelei introduced Valentine, but Design didn't recognize him. "Been in an accident, Mr. August?" he asked. "Your head looks like mine feels."

"Sort of an accident," Valentine said. "Hangover?"

"Hangover—and kicking myself," Design said glumly. "For a year I've been hunting a voice. Then I find it—and lose it again. Found him in a bar, but I was too woozy to chase him when he ran, and I can't even remember what he looks like." He shook his head ruefully. "I must have been tight—I keep thinking the guy had no head."

They were safe inside the suite now. "He hasn't," Valentine said, and removed the bandages.

Design leaped into the air, gasped, and staggered shakily into a chair. "It's harder to take when you're sober," he said.

"Well, you'll have to get used to it if I'm to work for you. My head's gone, along with my contract to Colossal-Epic. I'm all yours."

Design lifted the phone. "My lawyers' New York representative will be here with a contract in half an hour—matching your salary at Colossal-Epic." He looked at Valentine again, and shuddered. "But don't explain that—I wouldn't believe it anyway."

Valentine looked toward Lorelei happily—and she stared at him and cried out sharply. "Your face—Valentine, your face—it's coming back..."

Valentine whirled to a mirror on the wall. He could feel himself trembling, as though an electric current were going through him. It was true. He could see his face filling in as he looked, uncannily, like a movie fade-in. It went on slowly, but he could already make out the outlines.

He lit a cigarette fumblingly and stared at himself. "I don't get it," he said. "But I'm not questioning it. And I'm still sticking with you, Design. Epic may want to validate my contract again, but—well, maybe I was a ham—and we'll get out of it."

The door opened. "Certainly you'll stick to Mr. Design," Professor Coma said from the doorway. "That's the only reason I just developed your film at my laboratory. You're a success now."

He took something invisible from his arm, and handed it to Lorelei. "And I've brought back your cat, July, Miss Lee. August has its film in his pocket—and here's some pure alcohol to develop it."

"But…You mean that was July's film?" Valentine asked. "But—it's ruined. See?"

Coma glanced at it. "Beer, eh? Well, you may get some odd results—maybe a little of July won't come through where it should. But he'll live." He smiled. "I should have prevented your taking it, perhaps, but I figured you were young and deserved a little fun. The blow didn't hurt me, you know. I just slipped partly into another dimension." He smiled again, bowed gravely to Lorelei, and prepared to leave.

Valentine caught him. "Wait a minute. If you developed the film back in your laboratory, how did you get here so fast?"

"I flew, naturally," said Coma, and disappeared.

Valentine stood staring, waving the film and bottle of alcohol. Then, shaking his head, he pushed the film into the bottle, leaning over to inspect it. He couldn't see anything, but fumes came up, catching at his throat and sending twinges down to his coccyx. He gasped, swallowed, and watched a striped tiger-cat appear slowly at Lorelei's feet.

And then Valentine yelped, stared again, and made groping gestures toward a spot on his anatomy usually reserved for sitting. July was apparently complete—except for his tail. And Valentine was suddenly more than complete. He stared ruefully at Lorelei, started to sag, and then shrugged it off. After all, if she could put up with a headless man, this shouldn't matter. Then he saw her puzzlement give place to amusement, and he knew it was all right.

"The beer," he told her. "Coma warned me impurities…"

Design's lips moved soundlessly. "Don't tell me. Don't tell me anything," he said finally. You've got your head, I've got the voice I need. That's enough—or, wait. There's just one thing more. I haven't heard you meow."

Lorelei's face started to whiten, but she held herself firmly. "It's—well, different," she began. "It has a personality…"

But Valentine knew it was useless to explain. With things as crazy as they were, it might get by, but there was no use explaining. He threw back his head, opened his mouth, and let it slide. It began at his heels, worked all the way up, and came forth with full momentum. It was magnificent—a purring, howling meow; a meow to end all meows.

July looked up, opened his mouth, and gave vent to silence. Then the cat made a beeline under a couch and lay there hating the man who had somehow stolen his vocal cords and his meow.

Design beamed, Lorelei came into Valentine's arms. Valentine thought about the future happily, reminding himself to hold beer in special favor from now on. Then he couldn't resist the impulse.

He threw back his head and let it go again. It was even better; it had all the cultured development of his own voice with the results of all July's practice down back alleys. It was a superb meow, a meow to end all meows.

Somewhere in the distance, an alley cat joined in, to be followed by others. But their voices were a bit envious, as if they knew there could be only one Claudius the Cat.

The Monster

His feet were moving with an automatic monotony along the sound-deadening material of the flooring. He looked at them, seeing them in motion, and listened for the little taps they made. Then his eyes moved up along the rough tweed of his trousers to the shorter motion of his thighs. There was something good about the movement, almost a purpose.

He tried making his arms move, and found that they accepted the rhythm, the right arm moving forward with the left leg, giving a feeling of balance. It was nice to feel the movement, and nice to know that he could walk so smoothly.

His eyes tired of the motion quickly, however, and he glanced along the hall where he was moving. There were innumerable doors along it; it was a long hall, with a bend at the end. He reached the bend, and began to wonder how he could make the turn. But his feet seemed to know better than he, since one of them shortened its stride automatically, and his body swung right, before picking up the smooth motion again.

The new hallway was like the old one, painted white, with the long row of doors. He began to wonder idly what might lie behind all the doors. A universe of hallways and doors that branched off into more hallways? It seemed purposeless to him. He slowed his steps, just as a series of sounds reached him from one of the doors. It was speech—and that meant there was someone else in this universe in which he had found himself. He stopped outside the door, turning his head to listen. The sounds were muffled, but he could make out most of the words.

Politics, his mind told him. The word had some meaning to him, but not much. Someone inside was talking to someone else about the best way to avoid the battle on the moon, now that both powers had bases there. There was a queer tone of fear to the comments on the new iron-chain reaction bombs and what they could do from the moon.

It meant nothing to him, except that he was not alone, and that it stirred up knowledge in his head of a world like a ball in space with a moon that circled it. He tried to catch more conversation, but it had stopped, and the other doors seemed silent. Then he found one where a speaker was cursing at the idea of introducing robots into a world already a mess, calling someone else by name.

That hit the listener, sending shocks of awareness down his consciousness. He had no name! Who was he? Where was he? And what had come before he found himself here?

He found no answers, savagely though he groped through his reluctant mind. A single word emerged—*amnesia*, loss of memory. Did that mean he had once had memories? Then he tried to reason out whether an amnesiac would have a feeling of personality, but could not guess. He could not even be sure he had none.

He stared at the knob of the door, wondering if the men inside would know the answers. His hand moved to the knob slowly. Then, before he could act, there was the sudden, violent sound of running footsteps down the hall.

He swung about to see two men come plunging around the corner and toward him. It hadn't occurred to him that legs could move so quickly. One man was thicker than he was, dressed in a dirty smock of some kind, and the other was neat and trim, in figure and dress, in a khaki outfit he wore like a badge. The one in khaki opened his mouth.

"There he is! Stop him! You—Expeto! Halt! George…"

Expeto…George Expeto! So he did have a name—unless the first name belonged to the other man. No matter, it was a name. George accepted it and gratitude ran through him sharply. Then he realized the senselessness of the order. How could he halt when he was already standing still? Besides, there were those rapid motions…

The two men let out a yell as George charged into motion, finding his legs could easily hold the speed of a running motion. He stared doubtfully at another corner, but somehow his responses were equal to it. He started to slow to a halt—just as something whined by his head and spattered against a white wall. His mind catalogued it as a bullet from a silent zep-gun, and bullets were used in animosity. The two men were his enemies.

He considered it, and found he had no desire to kill them; besides, he had no gun. He doubled his speed, shot down another hall, ran into stairs and took them at a single leap. It was a mistake. They led to a narrower hallway, obviously recently blocked off, with a single door. And the man with the zep-gun was charging after him as he hesitated.

He hit the door with his shoulder and was inside, in a strange room of machinery and tables and benches. Most of it was strange to his eyes, though he could recognize a small, portable boron-reactor and generator unit. It was obviously one of the new hundred-kilowatt jobs.

But the place was a blind alley! Behind him, the man in khaki leaped through the busted door, his zep-gun ready. But the panting, older figure of the man in the smock was behind him, catching his arm.

"No! Man, you'd get a hundred years of Lunar Prison for shooting Expeto. He's worth his weight in general's stars! If he…"

"Yeah, if! George, we can't risk it. Security comes first. And if he isn't, we can't have another paranoiac running around. Remember the other?"

Expeto dropped his shoulders, staring at them and the queer fear that was in them. "I'm not George?" he asked slowly. "But I've got to be George. I've got to have a name."

The older man nodded. "Sure, George, you're George—George Expeto. Take it easy, Colonel Kallik! Sure, you're George. And I'm George—George Enders Obanion. Take it easy George, and you'll be all right. We're not going to hurt you. We want to help you."

It was a ruse, and Expeto knew it. They didn't want to help—he was somehow important, and they wanted him for something. His name wasn't George—just Expeto. The man was lying. But there was nothing else to do; he had no weapons.

He shrugged. "Then tell me something about myself."

Obanion nodded, catching at the other man's hand. "Sure, George. See that chart on the wall, there behind you…Now!"

Expeto had barely time to turn and notice there was no chart on the wall before he felt a violent motion at his back, and a tiny catching reaction as the other's hand hit him. Then he blanked out.

He came back to consciousness abruptly, surprised to find that there was no pain in his head. A blow sufficient to knock him out should have left afterpains. He was alone with his thoughts.

They weren't good thoughts. His mind was seizing on the words the others had used, and trying to dig sense out of them. Amnesia was a rare thing—too rare. But paranoia was more common. A man might first feel others were persecuting him, then be sure of it, and finally lose all reality in his fantasies of persecution and his own importance. Then he was a paranoiac, making up fantastic lies to himself, but cunning enough, and seemingly rational at times.

But they had been persecuting him! There'd been the man with the gun…and they'd said he was important! Or had he only imagined it? If someone important had paranoia, would they deliberately induce amnesia as a curative step?

And who was he and where? On the first, he didn't care—George Expeto would do. The second took more care, but he had begun to decide it was a hospital—or asylum. The room here was whitewashed, and the bed was the only furniture. He stared down at his body. They'd strapped him down, and his arms were encased in thin metal chains!

He tried to recall all he could of hospitals, but nothing came. If he had ever been sick, there was no memory of it. Nor could he remember pain, or what it was like, though he knew the word.

The door was opening then, cautiously, and a figure in white came in. Expeto stared at the figure, and a slow churning began in his head. The words were reluctant this time, but they came, mere surface whispers that he had to fight to retain. But the differences in the figure made them necessary. The longer hair, the softer face, the swelling at the breast, and something about the hips stirred his memories just enough.

"You're—woman!" He got the word out, not sure it would come.

She jumped at his voice, reaching for the door which she had closed slowly. Fear washed over her face, but she nodded, gulping. "I—of course. But I'm just a technician, and they'll be here, and...They've fastened you down!"

That seemed to bring her back to normal, and she came over, her eyes sweeping over him curiously, while one eyebrow lifted, and she whistled. "Um, not bad. Hi, Romeo. Too bad you're a monster! You don't look mean."

"So you came to satisfy your curiosity," he guessed, and his mind puzzled it over, trying to identify the urge that drove men to stare at beasts in cages. He was just a beast to them, a monster—but somehow important. And in the greater puzzle of it all, he couldn't even resent her remark. Instead, something that had been puzzling him since he'd found the word came to the surface. "Why are there men and women—who am I?"

She glanced at her watch, her ear to the door. Then she glided over to him. "I guess you're the most important man in the world—if you're a man, and not pure monster. Here."

She found his hand had limited freedom in the chains and moved it over her body, while he stared at her. Her eyes were intent on him. "Well. Now do you know why there are men and women?" Her stare intensified as he shook his head, and her lips firmed. "My God, it's true—and you couldn't act that well! That's all I wanted to know! And now they'll take over the whole moon! Look, don't tell them I was here—they'll kill you if you do. Or do you know what death is? Yeah, that's it, kaput! Don't talk, then. Not a word!"

She was at the door, listening. Finally she opened it, and moved out...

There was no sound from the zep-gun, but the *splaatt* of the bullet reached Expeto's ears. He shuddered, writhing within himself as her exploding body jerked back out of sight. She'd been pleasant to look at. Maybe that was what women were for.

Obanion was over him then, while a crowd collected in the hall, all wearing khaki. "We're not going to kill you, Expeto. We knew she'd come—or hoped she would. Now, if I unfasten your chains, will you behave? We've only got four hours left. O.K., Colonel Kallik?"

The colonel nodded. Behind him, the others were gathering something up and leaving.

"She's the spy, all right. That must make the last of them. Clever. I'd have sworn she was O.K. But they tipped their hand in letting Expeto's door stay unbolted before. Well, the trap worked. Sorry about cutting down your time."

Obanion nodded, and now it was a group of men in white uniforms who came in, while the khaki-clad men left. They were wheeling in assorted machines, something that might have been an encephalograph, a unitary cerebrotrope, along with other instruments.

Expeto watched them, his mind freezing at the implications.

But he wasn't insane. His thoughts were lucid. He opened his mouth to protest, just as Obanion swung around.

"Any feeling we're persecuting you, Expeto? Maybe you'd like to get in a few licks, to break my skull and run away where you'd be understood. You might get away with it, you're stronger than I am. Your reaction time is better, too. See, I'm giving you the idea. And you've only got four hours in which to do it."

Expeto shook his head. That way lay madness. Let his mind feel he was persecuted and he'd surely be the paranoiac he'd heard mentioned. There had to be another answer. This was a hospital—and men were healed in hospitals. Even of madness. It could only be a test.

"No," he denied slowly, and was surprised to find it was true. "No, I don't want to kill you, doctor. If I've been insane, it's gone. But I can't remember—I can't remember!"

He pulled his voice down from its shriek, shook his head again and tried to restrain himself. "I'll co-operate. Only tell me who I am. What have I done that makes people call me a monster? My God, give me an anchor to hold me steady, and then do what you want."

"You're better off not knowing, since you seem to be able to guess when I'm lying." Obanion motioned the other men up, and they waited while Expeto took the chair they pointed out. Then they began clamping devices on his head. "You're what the girl said—the spy. You're the most important man in the world right now—if you can stay sane. You're the one man who carries the secret of how we can live on the moon, protect Earth from aggressive powers, even get to the stars some day."

"But I can't remember—anything!"

"It doesn't matter. The secret's in you and we know how to use it. All right, now I'm going to give you some tests, and I want you to tell me exactly what comes into your mind. The instruments will check on it, so lying won't do any good. Ready?"

It went on and on, while new shifts came in. The clock on the wall indicated only an hour, but it might have been a century, when Obanion sighed and turned his work over to another.

Expeto's thoughts were reeling. He grabbed the breather gratefully, let his head thump back. There must be a way. "What day is this?" he asked. At their silence, he frowned. "Cooperate means both working together. I've been doing my part. Or is it too much to answer a simple question?"

The new man nodded slowly. "You're right. You deserve answers, if I can give them without breaking security. It's June eighth, nineteen eighty-one—eleven p.m."

It checked with figures that had appeared in the back of his mind, ruining the one theory he'd had. "The President is William Olsen?"

The doctor nodded, killing the last chance at a theory. For a time, he'd thought that perhaps the aggressive countries had won, and that this was their dictatorship. If he'd been injured in a war...but it was nonsense, since no change had occurred in his time sense or in the administration.

"How'd I get here?"

The doctor opened his mouth, then closed it firmly. "Forget that, Expeto. You're here. Get this nonsense of a past off mind—you never had one, understand? And no more questions. We'll never finish in less than three hours, as it is."

Expeto stood up slowly, shaking himself. "You're quite right. You won't finish. I'm sick of this. Whatever I did, you've executed your justice in killing the me that was only a set of memories. And whatever I am, I'll find for myself. To hell with the lot of you!"

He expected zep-guns to appear, and he was right. The walls suddenly opened in panels, and six men with guns were facing him, wearing the oppressive khaki. But something in him seemed to take over. He had the doctor in one arm and a zep-gun from the hand of a major before anyone else could move. He faced them, waiting for the bullets that would come, but they drew back, awaiting orders. Expeto's foot found the door, kicked at it; the lock snapped.

Obanion's voice cut through it all. "Don't! No shooting! Expeto, I'm the one you want. Let Smith go, and I'll accompany you, until you're ready to let me go. Fair enough?"

Smith was protesting, but the doctor cut him short. "My fault, since I'm responsible. And the Government be damned. I'm not going to have a bunch of good men killed. His reaction's too fast. We can learn things this way, maybe better. All right, Expeto—or do you want to kill them?"

Expeto dropped the gun a trifle and nodded, while the emotions in his head threatened to make him blank out. He knew now that he could never kill even one of them. But they apparently weren't as sure. "Take me outside, and you can go back," he told Obanion.

The doctor wiped sweat from his forehead, managed a pasty smile and nodded. Surprisingly, he stepped through a different door, and down a short hall, where men with rifles stood irresolutely. Then they were outside.

Obanion turned to go back, and then hesitated. Surprisingly, he dropped an arm onto Expeto's shoulder. "Come on back inside. We can understand you. Or…All right, I guess you're going. Thanks for taking my offer."

The door closed, and Expeto was alone. Above him, most of the building was dark, but he saw a few lighted windows, and some with men and women working over benches and with equipment. There was no sign of beds. All right, so it was some Government laboratory.

The most important monster in the world, the useful paranoiac they'd saved by amnesia. The monster they intended to persecute back to paranoia, in hopes he'd recover his memory, and the secret they wanted. Let them have the secret—but let him have peace and quiet, where his brain could recover by itself. Then he'd gladly give it to them. Or would he? Would he really be a monster again? Or might he learn the strange reason for there being men and women, the puzzle which seemed so simple that the woman had felt mere contact would solve it?

Funny that there were so many sciences, but no science of life—or was there? Maybe he'd been such a scientist—psychology, zoology, biology, whatever they'd call it from the Greek. Maybe the secret lay there, and it had completely burned out that part of his mind.

Then he heard the sound of a motor and knew they weren't going to let him go. He wasn't to have a moment of freedom they could prevent. He swung about sharply, studying the horizon. There were lights and a town. There'd be people, and he could hide among them.

He whipped his legs into action, driving on at a full run. The light of the moon was barely enough for him to see the ground clearly, but he managed a good deal more speed than the hallways had permitted. He heard the car behind on the road he found, and doubled his speed, while the sound of the motor slowly weakened as the distance increased.

He breathed easier when he hit the outskirts of the town, and slowed to a casual walk, imitating the steps of a few people he saw about. This was better. In the myriad streets and among the countless others, he would be lost. The only trouble was that he was on a main street, and the lights would give him away to anyone who knew him.

He picked up a paper from a waste receptacle, and moved off to the left, seeking a less brilliantly lighted street. Now and again he glanced at the print, looking for some trace. But from the news that his mind recognized as normal for the times, there was nothing on any mysterious, all-important person, nor on anyone who was either a monster or a savior.

Ahead of him, a lone girl was tapping along on the sidewalk. He quickened his step, and she looked back, making the identity complete as her tiny bolero drifted back in the breeze to expose all but the tip of her breasts. She hesitated as he caught up with her, looking up uncertainly. "Yes?"

She couldn't know the answers. Obviously she had never seen him. How could she tell him what he wanted to know?

"Sorry, I thought you were someone else. No, wait. You can tell me something. Where can I find a place to stay?"

"Oh. Well, the Alhambra, I guess." She smiled a little. "Back there—see where the sign is?"

She brushed against his arm as she turned, and a faint gasp sounded. Her hand suddenly contracted on his bare skin, then jerked back sharply, while she began stepping slowly away.

"No!" It was a small wail as he caught her shoulder. Then she slumped against him, wilting as he pulled her toward his face. He released her, to see her fall down in a sagging heap.

For a moment, the sickness in him rose in great waves, undulating and horrible as he dropped beside her. But when he felt the pulse in her hand still beating, it left. He hadn't killed her, only frightened her into unconsciousness.

He stood there, tasting that. *Only* frightened her that much! And finally he turned about and headed for the Alhambra. There was nothing he could do for her; she'd recover, in time, and it would be better if she didn't see him there. Then maybe she'd decide it was all a fantasy.

He watched a streak mount the horizon bitterly, remembering that the men had been discussing the two bases on the moon in the room where he'd first heard voices. They could face war, such as the rocket he saw being prepared, raining down in hell bombs from a quarter of a million miles, and only fear it vaguely. But he could drive someone senseless by touching her!

He found the night clerk busy watching a television set with the screen badly adjusted to an overbalance of red, and signed the register with the full name he'd hoped once was his. George Expeto, from—make it from New York. It wouldn't matter.

"Five dollars," the clerk told him.

Dollars? He shook his head slowly, trying to think. Something about dollars and cents. But it made no sense.

The clerk's eyes were hard. "No dough, eh? O.K., try to fool someone else. No baggage, no dough, no room. Scram.

Expeto stood irresolutely, trying to make sense out of it still. Dollars—something… The clerk had swung back to watching the set, and he reached out for the scrawny shoulder, drawing the man around.

"But look…" Then it was no use. The shoulder had crumpled in his hand like a rotten stick, and the man had lapsed into a faint with a single shriek.

Expeto stood outside, swaying while the sickness washed away slowly, and he told himself the doctors would fix the man up; that was what they were for. They'd fix him, and no real harm had been done. He hadn't meant to hurt the man. He'd only meant to ask him what dollars were and how to get them.

Then he moved on into a little park and dropped onto a seat. But the sickness was still there, a sickness he hadn't noticed, but which had been growing on him even before he'd hurt the clerk. It was as if something were slowly eroding his mind. Even the curious memory of ideas and words was going!

He was sitting there, his head in his hands, trying to catch himself, when the car drove up. Obanion and Kallik got out, but Obanion came over alone.

"Come on, Expeto. It won't work. You might as well come back. And there's only an hour left!"

Expeto got up slowly, nodding wearily. The doctor was right—there was no place for such a monster as he in the world.

"Left before what?" he asked dully, as he climbed into the rear of the car, and watched Obanion lock the door and the glass slide between him and the front seat.

For a second Obanion hesitated, then he shrugged. "All right. Maybe you should know. In another hour you'll be dead! And nothing can prevent it."

Expeto took it slowly, letting the thought sink into the depths of his mind. But he was important…they'd told him so. Or had they? They'd chased him about, bound him down, refused to tell him what he needed, refused him even civil decency and told him he was the hope of the world. Or had he only imagined it?

"I never wanted anything but myself. Only myself. And they wouldn't let me have that—not even for a few hours. They had to hound me…" He realized he was muttering aloud and stopped it.

But from the front seat, the voices came back, muffled by the glass, Kallik speaking first. "See, paranoia all right. Thinks he's being persecuted."

"He is." Obanion nodded slowly. "With the time limit the Government insisted on, the ruin of our plans by the spies that got through, and the need to get the facts, what else could we do? If they'd let us animate him for a week—but six hours' limit on the vital crystals! We've had to be brutal."

"You talk as if he were a human being. Remember the other—XP One? Crazy, killing people, or trying to. I tell you, robots can't be made trustworthy yet, no matter what you cybernetics boys have found in the last ten years. This one only had six hours instead of ten for the other, and he's already threatened us and hurt two people."

"Maybe. We don't know all the story yet." Obanion wiped his forehead. "And damn it, he is human. That's what makes it tough, knowing we've got to treat him like a machine. Maybe we grew his brain out of silicones and trick metal crystals, and built his body in a laboratory, but the mechanical education he got *made* him a lot more human than some people, or should have made him so. If I can prove he isn't crazy…"

Expeto—Experiment Two—stared at the hands he held before his face. He bent the fingers, looking at the veins and muscles. Then, slowly, with his other hand, he twisted at them, stretching them out and out, until there could be no doubt of the rubbery plastic they were.

A monster! A thing grown in a laboratory, made out of mechanical parts, and fed bits of human education from tapes in cybernetics machines! A thing that would walk on the moon without air and take over enemy bases, or do all men's work—but that could never be taken as a man by human beings, who grew from something or other, but were never built. A thing to be animated for a few hours, and deliberately set to die at the end of that time, as a precaution—because it had no real life, and it wasn't murder to kill a built thing!

A thing that somehow couldn't kill men, it seemed, judging by the sickness he'd felt when he'd hurt or threatened them. But a thing of which they couldn't be sure—until they'd tested him and found he was complete and sane.

He rocked back and forth on the seat, moaning a little. He didn't want to die; but already the eroded places in his brain were growing larger. It didn't matter; he had never been anyone; he never could be anyone. But he didn't want to die!

"Half an hour left," the cyberneticist, Obanion, said slowly, "And less than that, unless we make sure he doesn't exert himself. He's about over."

Then the car was coming into the garage, and Obanion got out with Kallik. Expeto went with them quietly, knowing that Obanion was right. Already, he was finding it hard to use his legs or control what passed for muscles. They went back to the room with the instruments and the waiting technicians.

For a moment, he looked at the humans there. Obanion's eyes were veiled, but the others were open to his gaze. And there was no pity there. Men don't pity a car that is too old and must go to the scrap heap. He was only a machine, no matter how valuable. And after him, other machines would see the faces of men turned away from them, generation after generation.

Slowly, he kicked at the chair, tipping it over without splintering it, and his voice came out as high and shrill as his faltering control could force it. "No! No more! You've persecuted me enough. You've tried to kill me—me, the hope of your puny race! You've laughed at me and tortured me. But I'm smarter than you—greater than you! I can kill you—all of you—the whole world, with my bare hands."

He saw shock on Obanion's face, and sadness, and for that he was almost sorry. But the smug satisfaction of Kallik as the zep-gun came up and the horror on the faces of the others counteracted it. He yelled once, and charged at them.

For a moment, he was afraid that he would not be stopped before he had to injure at least one of them. But then the zep-gun in Kallik's hand spoke silently, and the bullet smashed against the mockery of Expeto's body.

He lay there, watching them slowly recover from their fright. It didn't matter when one of them came over and kicking him senselessly. It didn't even matter when Obanion put a stop to it.

His senses were fading now, and he knew that the excitement had shortened his brief time, and that the crystals were about to break apart and put an end to his short existence, but in a curious way, while he still hated and feared death, he was resigned to it.

They'd be better off. Maybe the first experimental robot had known that. Expeto let the thought linger, finding it good. He couldn't believe the other had grown insane; it, too, must have found the bitter truth, and tried to do the only possible thing, even when that involved genuine injury to a few of the humans.

Now they'd have two such failures, and it would be perhaps years before they'd risk another, when their checks failed to show the reason for the nonexistent flaws. They'd have to solve their own problems of war or peace, without mechanical monsters to make them almost gods in power, while teaching them the disregard of devils for life other than their own.

And there'd be no more of his kind to be used and despised, and persecuted. Persecuted? The word stirred up thoughts…something about paranoia and insanity.

But it faded. Everything faded. And he sank through vague content into growing blackness. His thoughts were almost happy as death claimed him.

The Life Watch
[Life Watch]

I

Norden could feel fear knot his mind as he watched the tiny blue speck against the black sky. It was a senseless, unnatural fear, and he knew it. The searing blue point of flame meant that the ship up there was powered by atomic rockets—but the Aliens drove their ships in some mysterious manner without any kind of reaction motor. The object coming down toward the tiny asteroid could only be a human device.

Yet the fear grew worse. He shook his head, wondering again how close to insanity he had drifted. His eyes darted sideways, scanning the wreckage that had been the laboratory, then back to the approaching ship. Mercifully, he couldn't remember most of what had happened, but it had been enough to drive any human close to the brink of madness. It would have been bad enough to be left here for days in a wrecked and airless dome while the oxygen tanks were used up, one by one. But to have seen Hardwick's fate when the Aliens caught him…

He tried to stop thinking of it. The Aliens were only vague shadows in his mind now—the picture of what must have happened had been washed out completely, along with most of the memories of the period of struggling free from the wreckage.

Somehow, he'd survived, undetected by the Aliens. He'd dug out the emergency transmitter and tried signaling for help with it. Now, apparently, before the last tank of oxygen on his back was exhausted, rescue had come. He should have been ecstatic with relief.

The fear remained, some twisted reaction left over from the days of terror and hopelessness. He lifted his hands and studied them. They were steady enough; the fear was having no outward effect.

Already the ship was close enough for Norden to see glints of weak sunlight reflecting from the metal hull. The pilot must have been one of the best; there was no wavering or side-jetting to correct the course. It was coming straight down, slowing to a drift. The exhaust hit the jagged surface of the asteroid and splashed out. Suddenly it cut off, and the ship dropped slowly the few remaining feet, to come to rest less than half a mile away.

Norden knew he should start running toward it, and stood up. But he couldn't give the order to his legs. He stared toward the ship, then back at the ruins. Maybe there was something he should take with him. He had air enough for another hour. There was no need to rush things; men would be coming here for him. And it wouldn't do any harm to put off meeting them a little longer. He didn't want to be subjected to their questions yet.

He started hesitantly toward the ship, trying to force himself to move. Men began to emerge from the ship and head toward him. He dropped onto a mess that had been a superspeed-tape instrument recorder and waited.

His mind was running a rat-race inside his head, and there was a growing tension. He cleared his throat and reached for the switch on his suit radio. The men were almost up to him. He got to his feet again, fumbling with the little switch.

Then the harsh beam of a flashlight picked him out, and a gruff voice sounded in his headphones. "Dr. William Norden?"

He nodded, and rehearsed words stumbled onto his lips. "Thank God, you got here! I was afraid the transmitter wouldn't work!"

There was a hint of something like kindness in the "Take it easy, Dr. Norden! It did work, and we're here. What happened to Hardwick?"

"Dead, I hope," Norden answered. "The Aliens got him!" He shuddered, glancing at the spot where it had happened.

The man wearing colonel's comets nodded, while sickness spread over his face. He motioned to one of the others. "Get the pics of this wreck, and collect any records you can. The rest of you give Dr. Norden a hand. And make it snappy! They may have spotted us already!"

The man with the camera went to work, flashing his shots with a strobe light that blinked twenty-four times a second. Two others began unrolling a stretcher. Norden shook his head. "I can walk. And I've already collected Hardwick's notebooks."

They set a pace closer to a run than a walk, bouncing ludicrously in the slight gravity of the asteroid. Norden kept up with them easily enough, trying to make sense of his reactions. Most of the fear and tension was gone, as if he'd passed over some hurdle. Maybe the presence of military efficiency was restoring his confidence; maybe he hadn't believed in his rescue until now. But he felt better, though his eyes went on studying the others cautiously, as if looking for any reaction that would somehow betray them.

They reached the ship and began pulling themselves through its flexible hatch. The colonel jerked off his helmet and suit, showing iron-grey hair that contrasted with an almost youthful face; it was the face of a man who hadn't grown soft during the years before the Aliens came. He swung toward Norden.

"How much gravity can you take, Dr. Norden. Six G's?"

"In a hammock, for a few minutes," Norden answered.

They were already heading up the ladder toward the nose of the ship. The colonel ripped a sling out of its case when they reached the control cabin. He snapped it to its lugs, motioned Norden onto it, and bound him in place in less time than he could have ordered the job done. Then he dropped to his own control seat. "Six G's for five minutes, then hold her at four till I order. Up ship!"

Norden didn't black out during the first five minutes, though the pressure was enough to drive the sling to its bottom mark and make its cables groan in protest. As they switched from six to four gravities, the pressure eased a little. An hour crept by, and another. When the colonel finally ordered the drive cut, Norden estimated that they had been under acceleration for nearly five hours and were doing about two million miles an hour. Either the colonel was crazy, or the ship must have been stocked to the last bin with fuel. They were making more than five times the normal emergency speed.

Then the leader shoved back and began releasing Norden. "Sorry to give you such a beating after what you've been through, Dr. Norden. But we'll still be lucky if we have enough speed to slip past their detectors before they can trace our orbit and overhaul us. They've been getting worse lately."

He sighed, and his lips thinned. Then he managed a smile. "But you can hear all that later. You need food. And I guess the doctor and psychiatrist they shipped along will be biting their nails to give you the works. Oh, I'm Armsworth."

Norden felt the chill hit his mind again. He'd expected a doctor and had been bracing himself for one. But a psychiatrist… He forced calmness into his voice and tried to grin. "I could eat a horse!"

"You probably will," Colonel Armsworth told him with automatic humor. "This is the Space Service!"

The little cabin to which Armsworth took him was crowded already. There were the two men waiting for him, and their equipment. In addition, there was the bulk of a large recording machine ready to take down every word. He acknowledged the introductions and downed a glass of some oversweetened fruit juice the doctor held

"It'll get you ready for some real food," the physician told him. "Like to clean up while I look you over before the main course comes?"

Norden grabbed the chance. It would give him something to do besides worrying, and it was obvious he needed grooming. His dark hair was matted, his face marked with dirt that had sunk into every wrinkle and line, and there was a thick growth of stubble on his skin, it was a thin, fairly good-looking face, as unfamiliar as if he'd only seen it in a photograph. He seemed to have forgotten himself, even.

While he washed and shaved, the doctor was busy. But the examination was less detailed than he had expected, and finally the man stood back, nodding.

"For someone nearing forty, you're in good shape, Dr. Norden. You had a rough time of it, but nothing serious. I was sure of that when I heard you hadn't blacked out under high acceleration. Okay, go ahead and eat." He moved toward the door, out of the way, but showed no sign of leaving until his curiosity could be satisfied.

Norden fell to on the food, forcing himself to eat ravenously, though he had no apparent appetite. The psychiatrist leaned forward casually, watching him. "Want to tell us about it, Dr. Norden? What happened to Hardwick?"

Norden shook his head, while the tension increased again. The man would be watching for every hidden meaning in his words, and he wasn't ready for that. But he couldn't put it off. "I'm not sure I can tell much. I—well, everything's pretty foggy. A lot of it I can't remember at all."

"Partial amnesia is fairly common," the psychiatrist said quietly. "In fact, everyone has touches of it. Try going back a ways—say to your childhood—to give you a running start. We've got plenty of time."

Norden had little interest in his childhood, and he skimmed it with a few words. He'd done nothing unusual until he drifted into the new investigation of radiation outside the electromagnetic spectrum in his post-graduate college work. Then he'd suddenly developed. He was the first man ever to prove there was more than theory involved. He'd been called to Mars for the interplanetary award for his demonstration of proto-gravity after floating two ounces of lead with a hundred thousand dollars worth of equipment that used twenty kilowatts of power. In fifteen years at Mars Institute, he'd discovered four new types of extra-spectral radiation, become a full professor, and had almost discovered how to harness nuclear binding energy.

Then the Aliens had come. They had appeared abruptly near Pluto, apparently coming at a speed greater than light, in strange globular ships that defied radar detection. Without provocation or mercy, they had sought out and destroyed every settlement beyond Saturn and had begun moving inward, systematically destroying all life. Nobody had ever seen an Alien—they invariably exploded to dust before they could be captured—but the horror of their senseless brutality showed up in the hideous corpses they left behind them.

Norden had been drafted while there was still optimism. Men could build a hundred ships to the Aliens' one, equally radar-proof, free from danger of magnetic or electronic detection, and nearly invisible in space. In anything like an even battle, men were sure to win. But they soon discovered it wasn't an even battle. The Aliens had some means of detecting human ships accurately at distances of millions of miles, and blasting them with self-guided torpedoes, while remaining undetected. And behind the torpedoes would come the dark globular ships to spray the wreckage with some force that left every cell utterly lifeless. Then Norden had been assigned to test Hardwick's hypothesis.

Hardwick had been a quasi-scientist mixed up with certain weird cults who maintained a private so-called laboratory on an asteroid near Jupiter's orbit. And in the desperation that followed the first foolish optimism, his theory that the Aliens could detect life itself, or the presence of the fabulous mitogenetic rays that were supposed to radiate from nerve endings, was actually taken seriously. Surprisingly, the tests indicated that remote-controlled ships which had been completely sterilized went undetected, while ships carrying rats or other life were blasted. Norden, as the expert on all strange radiation, had been sent to the asteroid to work with Hardwick in attempting to devise a screen for the hypothetical life radiation.

He never learned whether Hardwick was a wild genius or an even wilder lunatic. While he was wearing Hardwick's improvised shield during one of the attempts to test it, the Aliens had landed and broken in.

"What did they look like?" the psychiatrist asked casually—too casually, Norden felt.

"Sort of..." He frowned, trying to remember, but a clamp came down over his mind, freezing it. "I—I can't remember. And they did—something—to Hardwick. I—I..."

Colonel Armsworth brushed the other questions aside. "Never mind. You were wearing Hardwick's shield. Didn't they notice you?"

Norden shook his head doubtfully. "No, I don't think so. It's all blurred. I think I jumped for the spacesuit locker when they breeched the airlock on the dome. I must have gotten into a suit and been hidden by the locker door. And I must have run out after they—took Hardwick—away."

At least he hadn't been hurt when the Alien bomb ruined the dome. He'd dug out the transmitter, sent the message, and then spent the agony of waiting in trying to decipher the cryptic code in Hardwick's notebooks.

They went over it several times, but he could tell them little more. Then there were tests, some of which he could understand and answer without trouble, while others left him taut with uncertainty and etched worried lines into the face of the psychiatrist. But at least the man nodded doubtfully.

"I think he'll do," he reported hesitantly to Armsworth. "A traumatic experience always leaves scars, but..."

"But or no but, he'd better do," Armsworth said gruffly. "No wonder they ordered us out to pick him up Within fifty feet of the Aliens, and they didn't locate him. Dr. Norden, if that shield works and you can duplicate it, you're the most valuable man alive!"

"And the tiredest and sleepiest," Norden suggested. His eyes narrowed and his mind darted about, seeking some sign of the wrong reaction. Then he relaxed as the doctor and psychiatrist picked up their equipment and went out with advice he hardly heard. Armsworth lingered, and Norden hunted for and found what seemed to be a safe question. "How long until we reach Mars, Colonel?"

"We don't!" Armsworth's voice was suddenly thick and bitter. "We've abandoned Mars. The Aliens have moved inward. We—oh, hell, we'll reach our new laboratory on the Moon base in about four days! And you'd better start praying that shield works, or..."

He shrugged abruptly and left, closing the cabin door. Norden slumped onto the bed, not bothering to remove his clothes.

Automatically, he lifted his arms until his hands were both pressing against the nape of his neck, settled into a comfortable position against the automatic straps, and began reviewing all the events of his rescue carefully. And bit by bit, the worry in his head quieted. He'd gotten away with it. What "it" was, he didn't know, but the horrible tension was gone.

II

The tension returned briefly when he reached the base on the Moon where the frenzied activity of the new laboratories went on. The taped interviews had been signaled ahead, together with Hardwick's notebooks and Norden's suggested list of equipment. Apparently, the information on him hadn't been satisfactory. He was rushed through an airlock and into a room where three men mumbled and muttered unhappily as he was given tests that served no purpose he could see. And finally, he was forced to sit in another room for nearly an hour while the three conferred, before he was given an envelope of papers and led through a tunnel to the office of General Miles, head of the whole Moon base.

Miles skimmed through the reports and reached for the hushed phone. He was a man of indeterminate age, with a young voice and old eyes. There was a curious grace to his gaunt body, and a friendly smile on his rough-hewn face, in spite of the marks of exhaustion. Norden watched him tensely, but could read no reaction to whatever was told him.

Then Miles turned back and stuck out a hand. "You're in, Dr. Norden, though you should be sent for six months' rest cure. You've had a devil of a time of it, and you show it. But we can't afford to let you go. Anyhow, you're probably no more psychotic than I am, since you're able to work. And we need your work. The last settlement on Mars was wiped out just before we could evacuate it. Hardwick's notes are pure gobbledegook, and we have to depend on your help. Come on."

He stood up and led Norden through a narrow door and into a tunnel that connected GHQ with a large Quonset-type building to the south. "We've got everything we could for you. We even got you an assistant, in spite of your idea that nobody could help, and the exclusive use of one of our computers." He threw open the door to the laboratory, and gestured. "It's all yours. I'll be around from time to time, but if you need anything, holler for it. You have star priority here."

Norden closed the door behind him as the general left. He studied the equipment—more than he'd dreamed they could provide. To them, he was probably off balance; but at the moment, they might have given top priority to a man who could do the Indian rope trick. It seemed like a sloppy way of running things, particularly since they hadn't put a guard over him or suggested a penalty for failure.

He moved back through the laboratory, examining its capabilities. Again, there was the disturbing sense that his experience had blanked out whole sections of his mind, until he had to puzzle out apparatus he must have used a thousand times. But it was still obvious that the laboratory had everything he could possibly want, and more.

He wandered back and around a big computer and almost bumped into a small, brown-haired girl in a lab smock that showed a well-formed body beneath. She stared up at him from her work at the keyboard, and her face broke into a slow smile. "Dr. Norden? I'm Pat Miles, your assistant. And don't let the general's being my father fool you. I had three years of extraspectral math and paraphysics at Chitec and I'm a registered computer operator, grade one. I only got assigned here when they couldn't find anyone else available."

It was obvious, of course, that she was the guard placed over him—a direct source of information for her father on his progress. But a known factor was always better than an unknown. He stuck out his hand, and she took it quickly. "Glad to have you, Pat. But until I can decode Hardwick's notes from what little I learned of them, there won't be much to do."

He'd decided during his examination of the laboratory that this was a reasonable job, and one which would take up enough time for him to orient himself. After that…his mind skidded off the subject.

She pointed to the worktable by the machine where the notes lay spread out. "I've been programming it already. If you can supply half a dozen keys, the computer should be able to translate the rest."

It rocked him for a second. He hadn't thought of the possibility, and it meant an end to stalling long before he could be ready. But there was nothing to do about it. He picked up the notes and began pointing out the few phrases he had learned, together with the only clear memory he seemed to have of his time with Hardwick. "The last page covers the final test. Hardwick had some cockroaches and mosquitoes left over from an experiment with various vermin, and he put them in a glass case. I stood at one side with the screen he'd made on me, and he stood on the other. Apparently he figured the things could sense the human aura, and the roaches should move toward my absence of one, the mosquitoes toward him for food. But there was no statistical evidence of its success."

She began feeding information to the machine, and reeling out the results, checking with him. At first, he begrudged the work, but then he found his interest quickening in the puzzle and its untangling. She was good at the work, though she found it hard to believe that the cult-inspired nonsense could be a correct translation. He began trying to anticipate the problems of her programming, and to scan the results, cross-checking to reduce errors from his own confusion.

Finally she nodded. "That's it, Bill. The computer can cross-check the rest itself. All I've got to do is cut the notes on a tape and feed them in. And you'd better go to lunch while I'm doing it—you're already five minutes overdue by the clock. Dad has you scheduled for his table, down in the GHQ basement cafeteria."

"What about you?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I want to finish this. I'll grab a bite later. Go on, don't keep Dad waiting."

Norden found most of the seats filled, but Miles spotted him and waved him over. There was a round of introductions to names that were tops in their fields—famous enough for even him to recognize, though he'd stuck closely to his own specialty.

As he waited to be served, Norden watched the men around him with surprise that grew into a sense of shock. There was none of the serious discussion to be expected of leading scientists and engineers. Instead, one group was indulging in some kind of horseplay that seemed to involve spilling ketchup over their plates, while another group was teasing one of the waiters about a large boil on his nose.

"How's it shaping up?" Miles wanted to know.

"We should have the notes decoded tonight," Norden told him. "After that, it's a matter of how useful they are."

Miles grunted unhappily. "They'd better offer a more promising lead than most of the others we've had. And soon! At this rate, in two more weeks, the Aliens will be taking over the Moon—and when that happens, we might as well stay here waiting for them." He turned to the head psychologist, while Norden was still hunting for the meaning of the implied threat there. "Jim, what about Enfield?"

"No dice," the psychologist answered. "He's obsessed with xenophobia—he hates the Aliens for breakfast, lunch and between meals. I can't treat him here. Of course, after what happened to his wife..."

Miles put his fork down and faced the group, but his eyes were on Norden. His words had the ring of an often-delivered but still fresh lecture. "Damn it, we can't afford hatred. Maybe the mobs need it to keep them going, but we have serious things to do that take sound judgment. Why not hate disease germs or any other natural enemy? The Aliens aren't horrible monsters, out for the pure love of evil. They're intelligent beings, doing what they think has to be done. I think they're wrong, and I can't understand them—though I wish I could. I consider poisoning bedbugs a wise move, though no intelligent bedbug would agree or understand. This expedition of theirs would be a major job for any race, and they're going at it as if it's serious business, just as we had to exterminate the boll weevil. Emotions haven't a thing to do with it. We're in a battle for raw survival, and we haven't got the time for indulging in our animal emotions. This is a scientific problem that has to be solved for our lives—like a plague. Let it stand that way!"

Norden added that to the puzzles; either Miles was setting another trap for him, or it was hard to understand how he'd gotten the five stars in his years. An enemy was an enemy! He decided on silence as the best course, and was glad when the others began to leave. He watched them moving out, shocked again at the horseplay that was going on. Did they really think war to the death was a game?

He started to follow, then hesitated. But it could do no harm. He located one of the waiters and asked for a package of food to take to Pat. With relief, he saw no surprise, and he soon had a bag in his hand.

Pat was still sitting at the machine, but nearly done. She took the food with a pleased smile that told him he'd done the right thing, studying his face. "Why so glum?"

"Puzzled," he told her. On a sudden impulse, he mentioned the lecture and the horseplay of the men.

"Dad!" She snorted, but she was pleased. "He always gives that lecture in front of a new man. Bill, did you ever see a little boy fighting a bigger one, wading in, crying, whimpering, but so mad he couldn't stop—couldn't even see where he was hitting? That's hate-fighting. And it's senseless, because the other side may be just as right as you are. Professional fighters don't really hate—they simply do everything they can to win, coldly and coolly, because that's best. As to the teasing—where've you been? Didn't they do that on Mars? You can't keep the whole world dead serious—if they didn't relax by playing like kids now and then, they'd go crazy with the pressure here. Loosen up! You act as if we couldn't win."

"Does it look like it?"

"The computer thinks so. I tried it. And we'll win because we aren't dead serious and totally efficient. We'll haggle and fuss and do all the wrong things, because we don't have a set pattern—because we've kept individuality. But those Aliens act like a pre-set machine. Like a crew killing pests. Start at the outside of a circle and exterminate inwards, planet by planet! Phooey. They should have hit Earth at once, even if they had to retrace their steps a few times. But they aren't investigating whether we act like the enemy they planned on. No—what's the proper way is the only proper way. A lot of our nations tried such predetermined, inflexible, fanatical tactics once—and look where they are now."

He shook his head, not believing her, but it left him uncertain and disturbed. The fact was that the enemy was closing the net—closing it so fast that he had only two weeks to live, if he couldn't find the solution. As to hatred and horseplay…

He shook his head and went into his office. There were copies of his own published works there, as well as the magazines he hadn't yet seen. He dropped down to fill in the holes his memory had developed.

Paraphysics was tricky stuff, being so new. For a long time men had known no other spectrum than the electromagnetic one, running from heat up through cosmic rays; when atomic particles moved from one energy level to another, they produced quanta of energy in that spectrum, which was limited to the speed of light. The kinetogravitic spectrum began with gravity and moved up through nuclear binding force toward some unknown band; apparently it was the product of the behavior of some sub-particle finer than any known, and its speed of propagation was practically infinite. Other spectra were being considered, but no order or logic had fitted yet.

He found an article by a Japanese scientist that suggested there might be a spectrum related to the behavior of atoms in the molecule—with crystals in some cases acting on one level due to the electron drift and on another due to atomic strains within the molecule. Colloids, polymers and even the encephalograph waves were dragged in, but the mathematics seemed sound enough. Norden caught his breath, and began digging into the equations. The third manipulation suggested that magnetism might somehow be involved, and that would mean…

He couldn't dig the idea out. Just when it was about to open before him, his mind seemed to shy away and drift off to other things. He was still working on it when Pat came in and dropped a sheaf of papers onto the table. Snips of tape had been pasted up to form a crude book. "The whole thing," she reported. "But most of it's nonsense about some secret asteroid where the survivors of the fifth planet are waiting for men to mature before bringing the Great Millennium—or pages where he worked on the numerology of your name before he discovered your middle name had no H in it—or little notes to himself about buying a gross of Martian sand lizards. I had the machine go through it and strike out all completely meaningless matter, and came up with this."

It was a clip of five sheets. Norden skimmed through them and groaned. The shield he had tested for Hardwick had been made of genuine mummy cloth, ground mandrake and a glue filled with bat blood.

"Yet you did live," Pat pointed out. "And he was right about their being able to detect life—we sent out sterile neoprene balloons loaded with live rabbits and others with completely dead rabbits. Every one with the live rabbits was blasted—and none with the dead ones. We could use the same test to find out whether any one of those things worked—or any combination of them."

"We'll have to," he decided. "And then it may have been the closet instead of the shield—or an accident to their detector that saved me. Pat, have they got some kind of library here?"

It was already quitting time, but she went with him while he persuaded the library attendant to let him in, before the next shift came on. Mummy cloth, it seemed, might become infused with a number of aromatic preservatives, products from the mummy, and such. It was ridiculous—but hardly more ridiculous than using the byproducts of mold to cure disease must have seemed. Anything dealing with life was slightly implausible. And when he called in the order for the materials to Miles, there were no questions.

"Thanks, Pat," he told her after she'd shown him where his sleeping quarters were.

She shrugged. "Why? If we don't find the answer, I'll be as dead as you in a few weeks."

He shuddered, and then shoved it out of his mind. Worrying about death wasn't decent, somehow. He found his bunk, stretched out with his hands behind his neck, and tried to review the serious events of the day—without the matter of hatred, horseplay, overefficiency, or Pat and her father. He saved those to worry about after he rolled over on his side and gave up all ideas of sleeping.

Then abruptly there was a yell from down the hall, and lights snapped on. Norden sprang out with the others, to see the outer lock click shut. Through it, in the glare of the overhead lights, he could see a figure running desperately for the edge of a further Quonset—running in the airlessness of the exposed surface without a spacesuit!

More lights snapped on, and a guard in a suit came around the corner, throwing up a rifle. There was a tiny spurt of flame from the muzzle, and the running man pitched forward. The guard started toward him just as a few men began to dart out of the huts in hastily donned spacesuits.

A greenish-yellow flame bloomed shockingly where the runner had fallen, and the floor shook under Norden. The guard was thrown backwards, and the others stumbled. When the explosion was over there was no sign of the men who had run.

"Alien!" somebody muttered. "A damned Alien! They blow up like that before you can get near them! I've seen it out in space!"

And Norden remembered the bomb that had wrecked the dome on the asteroid—a bomb that had flared up with the same greenish-yellow color. He slipped into a vacuum suit and went out, but there was nothing to see.

Guards came up to drive the men back to their huts, but Norden seemed to have a high enough rating to stay for a while. He learned that one of the workers was missing, and that it had been his badge which the Alien had worn to enter the sleeping sections. Either the Alien had killed and destroyed the worker for his clothing or else he had been the worker!

And he had been discovered forcing the lock on the sub-section of the hut where Norden had been sleeping!

III

The invasion of the base by the Alien had shocked them all, and few people had slept during the night. On his way to breakfast, Norden could feel the attention that was riveted on him. To the others, he was probably one of the most likely targets for whatever attack had been intended. He'd wondered about it himself, sick with a feeling of close disaster; but he could find no logical basis for the fear.

Miles waited until they had finished picking at their food, his own face a study in worry. Then he stood up and faced them. "No work this morning," he announced. "There's going to be a fluoroscopic test of every person on the base!"

Norden felt a wrench at his mind that left his thoughts spinning. He caught himself, just as he heard a gasp from Colonel Armsworth, a few places down. But Miles went on as if nothing had been unusual.

"The guards have already been checked. They'll lead us all down to the explosive-test chamber. There we'll go in, one at a time, and stand on a marked square. The fluoroscope results will show on a television screen where all can see. If you pass, you'll go across the chamber to the cleared rooms beyond. Any man resisting or proven non-human will be shot at once. The Alien last night looked human, but he didn't breathe oxygen, so his internal structure must be different. However, if anyone wants to declare that he's an Alien, he'll be treated as a prisoner of war instead of a spy."

Nobody made such a declaration, and Miles nodded to the guards who had filed in, while fear-ridden faces were still staring at their neighbors. Norden wondered how long a confessed Alien would last before the men tore him to bits. Discounting hate was fine at long range—but not when the danger was at your elbow.

Miles and Pat went into the chamber first, with the expected human skeletons and shadowy organs showing up on the screen. Norden stared at it in fascination, while fear built up inside him. Armsworth passed in and found his position, with a face that was somehow both taut and frozen. The guards took a look at the screen and waved him on. He half staggered to the exit, his face filled with an emotion that was unreadable.

Norden tried to fight down his own panic. Damn it, he knew he was human! But a doubt began to throb in his mind. He couldn't remember so much. He'd thought the Aliens had never found him. But if they had taken him, tampered with his mind, and turned him back, would he know it? He'd still pass this test, though. Suppose he was an Alien—one given a spurious, hypnotic belief that he was Norden until the right signal to become himself again…

It was ridiculous, absurd! But the speculations ran on in his mind. He didn't belong here. Men apparently took it for granted that a confessed spy could keep his life—and Norden took it equally for granted that death was the only answer. He didn't think like the rest of them. There'd been a week on the asteroid. His memories were spotty…

"Dr. William Norden!" the speaker announced. He jerked. Then he caught himself and forced his unwilling legs to move. The door shut behind him, and ahead lay the white outlines on which he was to stand. He drew up to the place automatically, aiming himself to face straight ahead toward the fluoroscope screen.

Now! It was almost a physical voice in his head. And his mind seemed to shift, and to shout something down. *Not yet! Look!*

"Okay, Dr. Norden," the speaker said. His eyes flicked to the screen, where a human skeleton showed dimly.

Crazy, he told himself. Hag-ridden with fears no sane human mind could have held. No wonder the psychologists had been uncertain about him. Crazy—but human!

Pat smiled weakly at him as he entered the room beyond to join the ranks of the elect. Then they watched as their group passed successfully, to give place to men from the freight gang.

The sixth one came through the door boldly enough— and suddenly leaped toward the side of the chamber where another door was. His hands were jolting at the locked barrier when the rifles sounded. A violent blast of greenish-white explosion rocked the chamber and shook the floors beyond. When it cleared, the Alien was dust and vapor, with nothing that could be studied for evidence.

Two workers who had been standing in line in a building beyond broke through the seal together, without waiting their turn, and headed for the shelter of a near barracks. A rifle bullet hit one, and both exploded.

By the time the rest had been proved safe, it was time for lunch—a quiet lunch at first. Then one of the men caught sight of a neighbor busily shaking his fork and looking sideways to emphasize some point. A tiny gadget appeared and was slid under the steak on the man's plate. Ten seconds later, when the man cut into the meat there was the bellow of a frightened cow and the meat leaped six inches up and two feet sideways. There was a shout of laughter that grew into a roar, and everything was suddenly normal again.

Norden shook his head. Fluoroscope or not, something was wrong with him; he couldn't have been so different from other men before the time on Hardwick's asteroid. That ruined steak had cost a small fortune in transportation from Earth, and the man would lose valuable time while waiting for another to be cooked. And yet, Norden could see that somehow it had been effective therapy, and he even felt somewhat better himself.

They spent the afternoon sending out the test "balloon" rockets with the various elements of Hardwick's screen. On the way back to the barracks, Norden noticed that there were now six guards about the laboratory, two of whom fell into step behind him. And he had been shifted to the dormitory over the Headquarters building, where he would be in the least danger—and also have the least freedom from observation!

But he forgot it the next day as the results of their tests came in. The shields had been completely ineffective. Dead rabbits still were unmolested, but live ones were picked off in everything they had sent out. Miles accepted the result with a tired shrug, but Pat was hit hard by it. None of the other research teams seemed to be getting anywhere. There was no way to detect Aliens and no way to screen humans.

On the fourth day, when the last possible variation of Hardwick's formula had proved useless and the Aliens had moved their lines up to fifty million miles from Earth's orbit, Pat was down early, rechecking the translation the computer had made. Norden came in, saw the results, and swore. For three hours he pored over the paper with the Japanese scientist's mathematics—and as before, he found his mind reaching for something, only to begin some useless side speculation that threw him off. It was as if he had a censor in his mind telling him he could go no further. He considered the prospect of ten days or more of life for himself and the men here, until the lunch signal sounded.

Somebody had put a new glue on the handle of his knife and fork, and it was fifteen minutes before he could locate a solvent that removed it. Pat howled at his plight along with the others. He checked his anger, swallowed it—and suddenly realized that, in a strange way, the practical joke was a mark of acceptance. He went back to the laboratory trying to think of something both mean and acceptable enough to live up to their queer code. An idea that had nagged him tantalizingly, just below consciousness, nibbled at his mind, but he let it go. If he could fit a protogravity generator under a plate…

And abruptly, he was digging for the complete set of Hardwick's notes and scanning the nonsense that the computer had declared meaningless. He picked up the telephone and called the library. "Give me what you've got on Martian sand lizards!"

Most of it was useless. They were typical low-grade Martian life, tiny things covered with fur, but vaguely lizard-like. Then the significant part came. "The females demonstrate a remarkable ability to locate the rare males at extreme distances. Janiekowski found that a female with all sense organs removed could locate a male at a distance of five kilometers, even when the male was enclosed in an airtight box of laminated copper and soundboard. No satisfactory explanation is known."

It had to be some form of telepathy or sensitivity to the life forces of the male! He went over the work done with the creatures a dozen times and could find no other explanation. And his mind was milling about, trying to slide away from it again. "Taboo!" he said. "Damn the taboo!" It was too late for it to operate now, whatever the reasons behind it; and judging by his growing certainty that something had been done to him, it only served to confirm the fact that he was on the right track.

Pat listened to his summary of what he'd found, and nodded quick agreement. "A quick test! It's what we need, all right. We still may not find the insulator for the shield, but we can run tests fast enough to have a chance. Metals first, then the other broad classifications, until something shows a sign. Bill, I guess this makes me and the computer look pretty silly. And after all the yelling I've done about flexibility being needed, too. I hope some place on Earth has a collection of the little beasts."

It turned out that Harvard was well stocked as a result of someone preparing to rework Janiekowski's experiments. In less then three hours, twelve females and two rare males were lying in front of Norden. They looked like small lizards covered with chinchilla hair and possessing eight legs apiece. The females were busily trying to break down the wall that kept them from the males.

Pat had already installed three television pickups and cages at various distant points, doing the work herself to insure secrecy, and picking the places most difficult to break into. Now she came back to move the females to their new homes, where they immediately began trying to crawl toward the torpid males, as shown by the television screens. The walls of their cages were equipped with pressure-measuring devices to test the strength of their efforts.

The mummy cloth drew a complete blank, as did the bat's blood. But the ground mandrake set the males to pawing at their cage with their triple tongues out, trying to reach it, while the distant females went berserk. Pat took the stuff away, snorting at them. "They'll die of frustration in another minute. To them an active male seems to be a combination billionaire, video star, and grand master in the art of love. I guess I know how they feel."

He was getting better at reading her glances, and he frowned as her eyes flickered toward him. He liked Pat, but…

She laughed. "Forget it, Bill. I was only ribbing you. You have about as much sex appeal to me as my grandfather."

It was ten minutes later before he realized what a typically masculine human reaction to such a remark would have been. He frowned, while his mind chilled at the implications. There wasn't much doubt now that the Aliens caught him and done something to him—something drastic. He wasn't quite human, in spite of what the bones of his body indicated.

And that could only mean that Hardwick's shield had never worked. He stopped short, and then reconsidered. The difficulty he had forcing his mind to think about tests for the lizards still spelled a taboo in his mind—and that indicated there might be a shield. It left him exactly where he was, except for the question of what the Aliens wanted. If he could find that and defeat it…

Nothing they tried gave any positive result, though Pat thought that the variation in the female activity had been slightly more than normal when they'd tried the potassium salt solution around the males. They gave up late, and Norden went back to his bunk, and to the familiar pattern of lulling himself into a semi-conscious condition by the ritual of reviewing the day with his hands behind his head.

Then he swore. It was a pointless habit. He put his arms at his sides and held them, while his head squirmed uncertainly. Habits could be broken—and any compulsion he had as a result of whatever had happened was a luxury he couldn't permit himself. There would be no recovery until he had overcome them all and filled all the gaps in his mind with useful things. Perhaps the Aliens had already succeeded; they might have decided somehow that he was the man who could solve the problem, and had tampered just enough to make sure he failed, while keeping him able enough to insure that no other man would replace him.

He yanked his arms down again, and started to turn over. Fifteen minutes later he came out of complete black out with his hands at the back of his neck and a queer feeling that his mind had remained active, with only his memory of it missing. His glance darted to the door, but it was still locked, and his clothes lay on the floor where he'd kicked them. Apparently he hadn't done anything while he was short-circuited from his memory, at least.

He thrust himself up from the bed in disgust, yanked on his clothes, and headed down the hall, back towards the laboratory. He passed the cubicle where General Miles should have been sleeping and noticed a trace of light shining under the door. For a second, he remembered the man's words—a spy who confessed would be treated as an honorable prisoner of war. Only, damn it, he wasn't a spy, whatever else he was. And there was no time left to find someone to solve the problem that had been dumped into his lap. He couldn't turn himself in while that was still hanging.

Inside his mind was a slowly growing hatred of the Aliens, and he clung to it. They'd denied him his right to be a normal human being—and while their imposed attitudes made it impossible for him to understand the absurd conduct of men, he was beginning to assume that the fault was with him, and not the rest of humanity.

Fresh guards had replaced the other couple, but they swung in behind him, and then stopped at the entrance of the laboratory. He'd insisted that they stay out, since he wanted no one to know what went on with the lizards. Complete ignorance of events was the only sure protection against spies.

He headed around the computer by letting his feet guide him, and reached for the switch. It clicked, just as a voice sounded in front of him.

"Norden, you damned fool! Leave those lights off!"

But they were already on, showing the figure of Colonel Armsworth standing before the cage of the lizards with a knife in his hand.

IV

Norden felt a wave of hate boil up, then checked it coldly, his mind reacting to the situation before he could realize more than a few of the implications. Obviously, Armsworth was a spy who knew of the work here and had come to wreck things. With his rank, it would be easy enough to get in. Also, the man stood there with none of the fear he should have shown on being discovered, and Norden felt the sick confirmation of his being a pawn for the Aliens.

But the fact gave him some chance. He lifted his arm to the switch and then dropped it. "The guards would suspect something if I cut it off now. Any suggestions?"

"I could kill the lizards and let you discover me and chase me out to explode," Armsworth said thoughtfully, without any emotional color to the suggestion. He shook his head. "I don't know. It's funny they can't trust you to stall off the Miles girl and have to send me here. With replacements though, I'd hate to blow up unless it's necessary." Then his eyes narrowed suddenly. "Hey, wait a minute. You weren't supposed to know..."

Norden's hand swept up and hit the light switch. His other arm jerked out for the big tongs he had spotted. He heard the spy leap and slipped backwards, just in time to avoid the rush. His arm came down with the instrument, and there was a solid thud. When he turned the lights on again, Armsworth lay on the floor with a groove running across his head deep enough to bury three fingers in.

Then slowly the corpse sat up and began hitching along the floor toward the cage of lizards.

Norden grabbed up the little cage and swung towards the door. He took one step, stopped abruptly, and reached down. His hand gripped the collar of the thing on the floor and he heaved it up against the light gravity of the Moon. The thing sailed across the laboratory, heading toward the rear of the heavy protogravity generator. Norden cushioned the cage of lizards against his chest and dropped to the floor in the shelter of the computer.

There was a blast that nearly ruptured his eardrums and the glare of greenish-yellow cut through his closed lids. The floor heaved and shook, while sections of the curved roof began falling. The air gushed upwards, the floor jarred again as the automatic airseal dropped, cutting off other sections.

Norden jumped toward a plainly marked closet and threw it open. He yanked down one of the spacesuits stored there for emergencies, thrust the lizard cage inside, and turned on the oxygen. Adapted to the thin air of Mars, they should be safe enough after so short an exposure here. He groped about until he found another suit that would fit, cursed as he found it zipped closed, and finally worked it open. Once in, he sealed it, and headed toward the lock on the big emergency airseal.

He got through just as the guards were about to enter in their own spacesuits, dragging rescue equipment. Miles was with them, waiting impatiently while Norden slipped his helmet off. "Who was it?"

"Armsworth," Norden told him. "And he passed the fluoroscope test!"

Miles sighed, but there was no surprise. "Damn! I should have had him checked when he came back from inspecting the far side. They must have had a spy all ready to make the switch as soon as they got him. Or maybe the test doesn't mean anything. How much damage?"

The guards had come back. One of them began to report what they had seen into a recorder. Most of the damage had been confined to the roof of the building and to the big protogravity generator. It seemed to have shielded the rest of the equipment. Norden and Pat, who had finally been called, went inside in their suits to supervise clearing away the debris. Outside, a crew was already erecting a new roof on the laboratory, using prefab sheets. Aside from the generator they had never used, nothing irreplaceable was hurt. And the two little male lizards were doing well enough. Inside of two hours the laboratory was back in business.

By common consent, Pat and Norden abandoned all idea of sleeping. He started to draw up a list of new tests, and then went back to the potassium shield. It seemed to produce a very slight quantitative difference in the reaction of the females. He consulted the vague speculations in his own works on possible other spectra, and came back. The trouble was that he wasn't working with any natural phenomenon, but with life. He grimaced at the twist of his logic, but the sense remained. Something came into the back of his mind from a phrase in Hardwick's notes. It teased him, until his mind almost had it, and then another taboo clamped down on his thoughts.

He fought it out, standing still while Pat stared at him doubtfully. Twice he could feel himself almost black out, but he tracked the taboo down in his mind, chased it into its lair, and strangled it. It died hard, but left his answer available.

"K-40," he said. His voice was steady, and Pat relaxed, unable to see the complete fatigue inside him. Disciplining himself seemed to be the hardest possible task. "Radioactive potassium isotope. It's supposed to be mixed up somehow with the life processes."

She reached for the phone, and spoke into it briefly. Then there was a wait before she handed it over, and a voice came on. "This is General Dawes at Oak Ridge. Who's calling?"

"William Norden, Project A-sub-zero, Moon base. I want five pounds of K-40 up here in four hours. Use my top priority and mark the shipment for delivery to me only."

There was the usual few seconds waiting while the message traveled to Earth and back. "Five *pounds* ?" the voice asked.

"Five pounds! And I may want more as fast as it can be gathered."

Pat was on another phone. Before Earth could answer again there was a click, and General Miles' voice broke in. "This is Miles, Dawes. Give Norden what he wants."

A sputter of protest began, and ended abruptly as Miles' voice reached Earth. The silence was broken with a sigh. "Okay, Norden, we'll get it to you by then, somehow."

It arrived in less time, and the two of them began the tricky job of getting the highly active element into a container both chemically and radioactively safe. They clamped it over the cage at last, and watched the pressure on the female cages. The results weren't spectacular, but they were unquestionable. And later, when they had reduced the amount of K-40 to a thin coating, it still worked. The quantity made very little difference beyond a certain minimum.

The effects still weren't good enough. They tried painting various substances with the chloride of the potassium, with equally good results and much greater ease of handling. The nitrate was even better to work with. But it took them until late that night before they learned that coating the nitrate onto cleaned iron was a major step forward. It had been all hit and miss, except for vague directional hunches, up until then.

Norden looked at Pat, who seemed ready to drop. "Better go back for some rest," he suggested. She shook her head, but did agree to lie down while he began formularizing their results to date. Their best efforts had quieted the excitement of the females by no more than ten percent. He reduced everything he could to a consistent basis and added other formulae which might apply from the incomplete relationship tables that strove to reconcile the two recognized spectra. Those might also indicate something about any third spectrum. Either his memory was coming back or his reading of the books and articles was beginning to take effect, he was pleased to notice. Pat was busy at the computer, which had fortunately suffered only minor damages and had been repaired. From the computations, they made the indicated experiments, and fed the results into the machine. This time, it gave only seven suggested answers, with a rough weighing of them. The second one called for one of several organic substances soaked in potassium ferrocyanide and grounded. While they waited for the chemistry shed to handle that with due precautions on the radioactive isotope, they tried the others. One gave a better than fifty percent reduction, which meant that the females were only mildly crazy.

"Don't they ever relax?" Pat wondered, nibbling at one of the sandwiches Miles had ordered sent in to them.

The female sand lizard's libido mattered less than nothing to Norden at the moment. He was staring at the work he had done in relating hints and fragments of information with pure hunches to get new facts, and realizing that he could never have done that even before the Aliens had tampered with him. Either he was mysteriously more capable now that he'd managed to overcome a few of the taboos in his mind, or else the loss of so much of his memory had left his thoughts freer to operate.

"We'll call this the Hardwick spectrum," he decided aloud. "The man was a crackpot cultist, but he was a genius, all the same. And with this, we'll pay those damned Aliens back for what they did to him."

"We wouldn't be able to if you hadn't had time to get the males and yourself into oxygen suits before Armsworth exploded," Pat told him. "They're the only males left alive, now that Mars has been scoured by the Aliens."

He swung around in surprise. "I never…"

The phone saved him from finishing. He hadn't had time to get the spacesuit first. He'd spent probably five minutes fumbling around after the blast before he was in one. And he'd arrived outside the lock without ever having felt discomfort from living in a vacuum that long!

His self-satisfaction vanished, and revulsion replaced it. He stared at his body in horror. No human body could ever stand such punishment, but he had taken it without noticing it!

Pat came back at a run. "Come on, Bill. A messenger just came up from Earth with five hundred pounds of K-40!"

"Five hundred?" He jolted out of his thoughts, into it memory of the amazed voice of General Dawes when he had asked for the fabulous quantity of a mere five pounds of the single isotope. Pat's face confirmed his suspicion. Earth couldn't have separated any five hundred pounds by now.

They found the guards already waiting to take them to where Miles was, and followed them down to the entrance of the explosion-testing chamber. There Miles was smiling and chatting with a man who appeared to be a perfectly normal rocket pilot, and who seemed bored until he spotted Norden. He consulted a picture on some kind of manifesto, and stepped forward.

"Orders are that I have to deliver the K-40 to you, Dr. Norden," he said. "But it's pretty bulky in its containers. If you'll come out to the ship and okay it…"

Miles cut in blandly. "I've been explaining the new regulations, Dr. Norden." He winked slightly with a faint motion toward the chamber.

"Go ahead and clear through," Norden told the pilot. "I'll wait, and then we can look at your cargo. It's a damned nuisance having to hold things up while everyone is X-rayed, but that's regulations now." He caught Miles' look of approval and knew he'd reacted correctly.

The pilot shrugged. "Why not? Let me know if you find any dangerous diseases." He chuckled and stepped through the entrance, and out toward the fluroscope setup.

The picture on the screen was perfect, and the guards started to relax from the slits where their guns projected into the chamber. Miles glanced at them, and his voice was low and commanding. "Shoot to miss. And keep getting closer."

Another screen showed the pilot turning back, just as the first bullet hit the floor three feet from his boots. He jumped and yelled something. Another bullet came closer, and a third just missed. Shock hit his face, and vanished as he turned into a bright splash of greenish-yellow light.

"They overestimated our production and underestimated our ability to bluff," Miles said. "Good shooting, men. I'm glad he decided he'd failed the test before you had to shave it closer."

Norden stood staring at the blasted area and back toward the screen that had shown the picture of a normal human before a fluoroscope. Breathing vacuum for five minutes hadn't hit him as hard; subconsciously, he'd counted on the fluoroscopic evidence—and it had proved to be a lie.

"He couldn't have been an Alien with that kind of a skeleton!"

Miles shook his head. "He wasn't. As near as our cyberneticists could gather, he was some kind of a robot, designed to mix with us. We've caught a few telephotos of the Aliens, and they look a little like octopi on stubby legs. Nothing could make them look human."

"But a robot with a human skeleton?" Pat asked.

"It's possible, with enough advanced development. Hide the metal works in the so-called bones and skull, and shape everything else to the right form and transparency. Hughes swears that any race capable of developing such an advanced cybernetic brain could handle the rest—down to letting him get his energy out of our food." Miles' face was more fatigued than ever, but he found enough strength for a smile. "Thanks for playing along with me, Bill. Now get back to work, if you can stand it. The chem lab delivered your stuff while you were coming here."

The stuff from the chemists looked like wool, impregnated with the K-40 salt. Pat slashed off a yard of the coarse cloth and draped it around the cage, after a quick check with the Geiger-Mueller counter. She formed a rope of it and connected the cage-cover to the nearest pipe.

And the images of the females in the screens were suddenly still, as if all of them had gone to sleep at once. Pat yanked the cover off and instantly the females were dashing at the gates of their cages again.

Pat let out a yell and grabbed for the phone. Norden tried to echo her enthusiasm, but there was no resiliency left in him. He stared at the answer to their problems, while part of his mind estimated that the pilots could stand the radioactivity from suits of such cloth for long enough if an undersuit of lead-cloth were also worn.

But the rest of his mind was in the depths of his own private hell. Robot, it shouted at him—robot and spy! It was plain enough now that his periods of "relaxation" and review of the day had been the leak of information to the Aliens. His rebellious attempt to end it had been the signal to send Armsworth against the male lizards. Hands-behind-the-head-Norden, he thought—the robot too dumb to recognize the working of an automatic transmitter switch.

He fondled the cloth slowly, tasting the anticipation of revenge. The Aliens had taken a man named William Jon Norden from a lonely asteroid and had drained him of his life history and knowledge. They'd built a poor dupe of a robot and had sent it out to spy for them, and to believe for a while that it was real and alive. Now let them feel the defeat they'd earned when they built their robot too close to the original in abilities!

Then he considered the thin thread on which his hopes rested. He had something that stopped some form of energy from being detected by the lizards—an unknown bandwidth of an unknown spectrum which might not even be the right one.

He swung around to check Pat's call, but it was too late. The word had already spread, judging by the whoops coming from beyond the laboratory.

V

Norden broke away from the men, who refused to listen to his warnings, as quickly as possible. Pat had already gone to her bunk, worn out completely by the brief burst of hope, and he headed for his own cubicle. There was no physical fatigue—how could there be in a robot? But his mind was dulled with too many shocks. He dropped to the bunk, and his arms came up automatically.

He forced them down, and this time he was ready when his brain tried to black out on him. The compulsions that acted on him to make him pass on his information to the Aliens was partly under his control. He managed to sidetrack his thoughts before blacking out, and to keep his arms down. He lay there, cursing himself and the things which had created him, fighting his battle silently, until he knew he had won.

His legs were unsteady when he finally stood up. The effort of will had shocked even his motor control impulses, but the damage was not permanent, and by the time he passed Miles' darkened doorway he was moving smoothly enough again. He saw surprised looks exchanged by his guards as they followed him back to the laboratory.

"You might as well come in," he told them. "I'll be here all night, and there's nothing secret about my work now. I think there's a deck of cards in the desk over there."

One of them looked and came back, holding the deck and grinning. "Thanks, Doc," he said. "You're all right."

For a second, Norden savored the words as he turned into his office. He'd learned in the days he was here. He could find some acceptance among men now. Then he grimaced bitterly, as he realized what they'd think of him if they knew what he was. It was one thing to ape humanity, and another to belong.

The article on speculative spectra by the Japanese was still there, and he began poring over it. Almost at once his mind jerked away on a flight of curiosity about the card game the men were playing. He pulled it back, and it turned to hatred of the Aliens. He fought against that, tempting as it was. He'd licked the compulsion to communicate with them in two hours. There was hope that he could lick the taboo against investigating into this forbidden field. And the fact that it was forbidden made it doubly worth studying.

Bit by bit he traced down the mathematics, but in the end the taboo threw him. It required all the effort he could bring to the problem to follow the tricky formulae, and it couldn't be done while fighting the treachery of his own mind. He gave up in disgust and turned to the computer.

He'd seen Pat use it often enough, and apparently his robot mind was good at memorizing. He searched through the available tapes of information until he came to one marked as covering Einstein's unified field theory. He fed it in, and began adding the spectra-relation data from the books, storing them in the memory circuits of the machine. The mathematics of the article went in next. He made sure the material they had used to find the screen was still active, and brought it up to date. Finally he set the machine to deriving all possible extensions of the mathematics he couldn't handle himself.

When that was finished, there was no longer any need to worry about the taboo. The computer had done what he had tried, and more. He stared at the sheaf of papers. There was enough material here for years of work on extraspectral radiation. And his suspicion that magnetism was the common link seemed to be confirmed. It seemed to be something of a universal transformer, when properly handled.

But the machine couldn't tell him what section of the Hardwick spectrum would involve life. The field used by lizards to locate each other lay well up in it, somewhat analogous to the X-rays of the normal spectrum. But if that failed, there was no clue to what would work. In any new field, one fresh fact could open up tremendous stores of knowledge—but there would always be even greater ones not revealed.

He put in a call to the library for more material on Janiekowski's work with the lizards and was told that they'd have to secure a tape from Earth. Earth promised a ship with the material and other things he requested within three hours; there was no questioning of his priorities this time.

Then he glanced at the clock and was shocked to find it already past noon. He got up impatiently, heading toward the lunchroom. It was strange that Pat hadn't come.

He found her and Miles coming toward the laboratory, and one look was enough. Miles motioned Norden to follow him and led to his office. There he closed the door and threw the decoded dispatches down for the other to see.

"The Aliens have cut the distance to ten million miles from Earth," he said wearily. "We've been holding out by sheer numbers of ships. Send out a hundred near each other, and the Aliens can't handle them all at once. If they're lucky and spot the first torpedoes, they can trace them back and a few ships may survive long enough to send visual-pattern-seeking atomic torpedoes toward the Alien ship. But we can't get closer than a few hundred thousand miles with any life aboard a ship, because that radiation—or whatever it is—that they use is fatal closer, so long as they can detect us. You can see why Command rushed through all the screen suits they could and struck with them this morning. They had to."

Norden picked up the dispatches and scanned them. Seven hundred pilots out of twice that many thousand had been screened. A third of the total number had returned—but none who had been theoretically protected. The Aliens had apparently not only spotted them all, but had concentrated their torpedo fire on those ships. It had been a complete failure!

There was no use in reminding them that he'd tried to warn them. Earth hadn't been able to heed such warnings. He handed the papers back, and his thoughts were filled with the picture of seven hundred men—men probably like the guards who'd called him all right—who had lost all their marginal chance to live because a robot had failed. It was nonsense, his mind told him; soldiers were meant to die. But the picture remained. "So what happens to me now?"

"So you try again, of course," Miles answered, apparently surprised at the question. "At least the fact that they worked that hard to eliminate the ships with the screen indicates you're on the right track."

"Tracing a single drop of water in the ocean. Looking for a trace of life that can be detected for millions of miles when we're in the middle of millions of living creatures. I've been working on that already. And the only reason we could detect and screen the lizard signals was because they were unique. Hardwick was right about that, too—you have to look for life forces where they're unique. I need isolation from people, animals—even from germs and viri, probably."

Pat gestured to a map on the wall. "There are the mine installations on the far side of the Moon. Would they do?"

He had no idea, but it was the best he could hope for. He nodded slowly, and she turned towards the door.

"Then what are we waiting for? We've got too little time now."

"You're not going, Pat," he told her. "Nobody is. I need isolation from life, remember! Besides, if there's any means of communication between here and there, I'll need you here to work the communicator."

There was a line that was still useful, as a quick check showed. And there were ships to carry all the equipment he needed, including two rabbits, and a male and female sand lizard in little airtight cages where oxygen could be supplied from tanks. He had no idea of what he would need, and had to take everything he could imagine as being useful. But three hours later he stood alone in a building that had served as a barracks for a mine crew, he watched the rockets leave, and began opening the airlocks to space. Any bacteria left by the former men would be killed by that, he hoped.

He had no belief in success yet. He might be keeping a death watch over the human race as the Aliens moved in—or a life watch, since he was seeking life while they were heading toward the end of it. But he, at least, was no living thing, and the life detectors of the Aliens should miss him. Somehow, he'd learn enough to seek vengeance among them.

They'd made a mistake in creating him with all the ability of the original

William Norden and the thinking speed of a robot. They'd made a bigger mistake in thinking that a robot capable of understanding humans was only a robot, and that orders in the form of compulsions would be followed without question. And for their mistakes, they'd pay. He had twenty-four hours out of each day for work, until they caught him, to learn their further weaknesses.

He flooded the front entrance, where the television link to Moon base was, with air to make speech possible, and rigged up a flexible seal to the rest of the building.

Janiekowski had dissected countless sand lizards, and the pictures were included in the reel of tape from Earth. He studied them, digging into what the calculator had supplied him about radiation and its behavior in the third spectrum. He found, as he had expected, that a tiny bit of radioactive material lay at the base of the microscopic receptor in the female, and that the same was to be found in the organ the male used to generate the force. And there was a tiny helix of superfine, wirelike material around it. He had no idea of what the conductor was composed of, or how the animals generated the faint currents of electricity they'd need, but he was sure the helix was a tiny electromagnet.

He built a model as best he could, and tried to find some sign that it picked up a signal from the male. And finally he was forced to anesthetize the female and remove her receptor for examination under the portable electron microscope.

It took eleven tries before he was able to detect anything, and then the result surprised him. The faint, almost invisible glow from the radioactive disintegration in his device abruptly faded. He had been expecting it to increase, but whatever force the male broadcast acted to decrease the "unchangeable" rate of decay of a bit of K-40.

He called Pat, asking for information. Her face was haggard with worry and her attempt to be awake whenever he might call, but she wrote down his questions and cut off without wasting time. Half an hour later, she called back.

"You're right. Uranium bearing ores from out in space contain much less uranium in proportion to lead than those on Earth. Geologists say this is because either those space borne rocks are older or because cosmic radiation acts on them more."

"They'll have to change that," he said flatly. "It's because radioactivity is inhibited by the life processes. And I don't know how. I know I need that data fed into the computer, though."

It meant that they'd have to revise all their figures about the age of the

Earth, and that since life began on Earth and Mars, no radioactive half-life had been natural. Probably the rate of decay had varied slightly with each century, as the amount of life changed.

He fed her a list of calculations, and waited while the machine ground out its answers. Pat came back to the screen while it worked on automatically. "They're bombing the base now," she reported dully. "We've been able to miss being hit by keeping a cover of volunteers up to attract the seeking units before they reach us. And the Aliens are within three million miles. We can't hold out much longer."

"Don't forget your optimism," he said. He'd meant it for reassurance, but she stared back as if he'd slapped her. "I mean your computer calculations on victory for Earth. How come they moved in so quickly?"

"It's been three days," she told him. "Don't you know how long you've been out there?"

He hadn't kept track. But the cluck of the computer ending its work interrupted them, and she held the results up to the screen for him to copy with the camera at his end.

He studied the formulae for long, wasted minutes before he could accept them. Then he sighed, and went on to other work.

There was no shield possible for any object bigger than about twice the size of the cage they had used. There could never be any way to protect a man from the Aliens. It was to be a death watch he kept apparently. And Pat must have known it when she saw the formulae, since she had picked up the basic knowledge to read it.

He stood staring up at the space above him, letting the hate harden inside him, while he pictured the base in the hands of the invaders! The men there were beyond saving, according to the figures he had now. But it was still not too late for vengeance, or for them to strike back at the Aliens, perhaps.

This time he deliberately searched through all the taboos in his mind to find the answers he needed. It was still painful and difficult work, but he seemed to be gaining skill at overcoming his compulsions. At last he found the information he wanted in those areas of forbidden knowledge.

The Aliens were not life as men knew it. All protoplasmic life was imbued with and radiated the mysterious, extraspectral life forces he had discovered. Tiny—incredibly weak—as the energy of those life forces was, it could seriously inhibit the rate of radioactive decay for hundreds of millions of miles around it. Alien existence was a pseudo-life based on the rapid breakdown of radioactive isotopes. To the Invaders, protoplasmic life was a fatal poison; they had no choice but to accept extinction or wipe out all living things around them.

Understanding of the weapon used to eliminate every living cell was buried in Norden's head, but he disregarded it now. His interest centered on their means of detecting life. It had evolved from an inherent ability, but was now mechanically strengthened and refined far beyond any human theory of extraspectral forces and their control. And with knowledge of that, he hoped, would be the fuller knowledge needed to control and project such forces against the Aliens.

He found what he wanted, finally. The theory was difficult, but the application was within his means. And fortunately, only tiny amounts of power would be needed.

He drew up the plans this time with sureness. He was no longer amazed at the progress he'd made in understanding extraspectral phenomena. It might very well represent the work of generations of scientists, but he was a robot designed to gain understanding of human science from the few smatterings the Aliens had been able to learn when he was created. His mind had to be programmed for speed and adaptability.

He finished the designs, wrote down the proper formulae, and stuck the papers in front of the television pick-up, pressing the call button. Without waiting for an answer, he went back into the workshop and began assembling the tiny, radioactive strontium batteries and tubes of protein plastic wound with layers of iron wire. He had enough for what he needed.

The device was set to work both as a detector and a generator of the radiation involved. He timed one, setting it to receive. It took a few minutes to replace the antenna of the small radar set he'd brought with the hastily constructed new device, and he forced himself to work faster by the sheer drive of his will. Then he stepped back, letting the new antenna revolve on the antenna mount. He begn increasing the current that controlled the degree of electromagnetism in the wire, which served to time the device.

A pip appeared on the screen, pointing toward the cage where the male and crippled female lay peacefully together. Norden raised the frequency until another pip appeared, this time pointing to the rabbits. He adjusted it for maximum brightness. In the section which should cover the direction of Moon base below him, a brilliant glow sprang up, indicating radiation that cut straight through all the layers of the Moon. Then he found the exact frequency, and the whole screen blazed, blanked out by overloading of the amplifier. Apparently all life of Earth stock radiated at the same frequency. He cranked up the frequency control, expecting nothing more.

Then he bent forward sharply as other pips appeared, indicating objects out in space!

The Aliens also radiated in the same spectrum—but at such a high frequency that no atomic nucleus was small enough to be affected by the radiation.

As he watched, the central pip suddenly began to grow brighter, holding its position in a way that indicated a straight descent toward his detector!

They also had detectors for that frequency, and his detector was sloppy enough to radiate a faint trace of its own. He'd been spotted, and the exterminating force was on the way.

VI

Norden grimaced at his own stupidity, and estimated the time it would take. If they decided to come in to spray this area with their own force, or to capture it, he had several minutes. If they sent one of their superspeed torpedoes, he was already on borrowed time.

With a few minutes to spare, he could time the tube to make it function as a weapon and spray them with that. Its straight-line efficiency should be enough to make sure no dangerous amount of its radiation reached the men two thousand miles away. Vengeance was his for the taking.

He reached for the other tube, hesitated, and grabbed up a piece of paper and a pencil. The men at the base had the working plans of his device by now. They had to be warned of the danger of not making absolutely sure their radiation generators or detectors couldn't spill dangerous radiation among them, and that the Aliens could detect an inefficient search ray.

Norden headed for the flexible seal at a full run, while his rock-steady hands penciled the final information on the radiation frequencies needed. He broke through into the air of the entrance, yanked the diagrams off the pickup rack, and snapped in the new piece of paper. He turned with a single motion and headed for the workroom again. And stopped!

Beyond the entrance, the fins of a rocket were visible. And the red light on the airlock indicated that someone was using it. As his eyes focused, he saw the inner lock open, and Miles and Pat stepped through it.

They started to say something, but he cut them off. "For God's sake, stay here. There's no air beyond. Alien ship!"

He jumped through the seal. His hands swept up the tube that was to be a weapon, and his eyes darted to the screen. The pip was bigger now, and at maximum brightness. The Alien ship must be only tens of thousands of miles above, braking down to spray the moonscape here.

And less than a hundred feet away, the two humans waited, subject to any energy that might spill from his weapon. It would have to be a perfect piece of workmanship, with all its radiation directed in a straight line.

The formulae of its propagation seemed like an endless belt in his mind. He tightened the helix of wires about it, trying to be sure they were even. With time, there were a number of things he could do, but he had no time to spare. This might harm Miles and Pat—but the Alien beam would leave nothing to chance.

The thought of them jolted through his mind in a delayed reaction. They'd seen him come into this airless space without a helmet. They knew he wasn't human! Discovered! Explode!

"No!" he shouted silently into the airless room. He had to get the Alien first!

He had no idea of the time left as he snapped fresh batteries into place and tried to line the weapon into resonance with the detector settings. He lifted his eyes, to stare up through the open roof of the building. There must be a faint black dot in the sky, but he couldn't see it against the blackness of space. He lifted the weapon, pointed it toward where the Aliens should be, and depressed the little trigger, moving the rheostat back and forth to be sure he had covered the lethal frequency.

He felt a tremor on the floor, and his eyes caught a glimpse of Pat beside him before he could force his gaze toward space again. She was shouting something inside her helmet.

Then he caught the first visible sign of the Alien ship, already within miles of the building, and big enough to show in the sidelight of the sun. It came rushing down in an unchecked plunge, apparently heading straight for him! He strained his eyes, tracing its path. Then he relaxed. It was moving sideways and would land a mile away. The weapon had worked. No ship would have that speed so near the surface if the pilot were not destroyed.

He grabbed for Pat and dragged her to the floor, away from anything that could fall on them. There was no sound, but a tremendous jolt rocked the floor of the building, and the ground around seemed to dance madly. A shaft of greenish-yellow sprang up, mixed with a glaring red from the distance. The ship had struck at a terrific speed—fast enough to reduce everything in it to pulp. Then the ground was quiet, and Norden sprang to his feet.

Now!

He caught the thought in time. He couldn't let himself explode here. He had to get outside, away from the two humans. The compulsion squeezed and writhed in his mind, but he held it. It was tenfold as strong as the others—and the need to overcome it until they could be safe was a hundred times as great.

He stumbled toward the seal as Pat stood up. His body slipped through the seal and almost bumped into Miles, who was apparently waiting for him. Norden had no spare effort for speech or thought. He headed dumbly for the airlock that would lead outside.

"Norden!" The general had grabbed his arm and was following. "Norden, if you go out there, I'm going with you. And whatever happens will happen to me, too. You've got to listen!"

He tried to bull his way ahead, shaking his arm to free it. The other arm was also carrying a dead weight, and he could see Pat's face beside his own.

She was screaming at him over the suit radio. "Bill! Bill, we knew it all along! We knew you were a robot! It doesn't matter. If you explode, you'll take us with you!"

He hit the lock with them still on his arms, and the words froze meaninglessly in his ear as he held back the driving urge until he could escape from them.

Miles clung grimly. "It's the Aliens, Bill! It's their idea for you to explode. The damned Aliens who want to kill you! Do you love them so much you'll kill us all? Or do you hate them?"

It penetrated slowly. The Aliens wanted to kill him. And he hated them. They'd played with him, had made him a monster to do their dirty work. They'd given him nothing. And now they wanted everything. They wanted to kill him and his friends. He hated them.

The hate washed through him—the cold, hard hate that had the greater strength for its lack of endocrines or other emotions. He'd be damned if he'd let the Aliens force him to kill himself!

"I'm all right," he said slowly. "You're safe. You can go back to the base."

Miles stared down at him with the smile growing stronger on his lips, though his eyes were sick with worry and strain. "We did know about you, Bill. That business about being the only undetected human out there on the asteroid looked suspicious, and the psychologists weren't fools. We were gambling on a chance to get some information on their detector out of you before you could do anything. Norden was the only man who could have known enough to have any chance; with him dead, we had to hope they'd give you information enough to act in his place. Pat volunteered to watch you. And we had ultra-violet sensitive cameras in every room where you ever were, watching you every second."

He paused, but Norden could think of nothing to say. He looked at Pat for confirmation, and she nodded. "We set the whole thing up for you, Bill. But we found we were wrong. The Aliens had done too good a job on you for their own good. They made you too human—so human that you had to begin thinking our way. After that business with Armsworth, we stopped worrying."

"But you came out here…" he began.

"Not to spy on you, Bill," Miles told him. "Earth's evacuating the Moon, now that you found us weapons to handle the Aliens. We're needed to supervise things back at the factories. Pat and I just came to pick you up, when you wouldn't answer your calls. We're taking you home."

He stared at them silently, and there was a complex of feelings in his mind that made thinking almost impossible. But bitterness was heavier than anything else. "That's fine for someone who won't hate an enemy—though you're quick enough to use hate when it's useful. What about the rest of the world? Will they want a bomb-carrying monster as a pet?"

Miles put his hands on Norden's shoulders, while Pat went back into the workroom. "Sit down on the desk, Bill. The only people who know are the two of us and Jim—the psychologist who predicted exactly how you'd react from the beginning. He also gave you one test that first day that involved our top-grade X-ray machine—not one of these fluoroscope toys. It's a good thing you've got your brains all through you, because when I get done, you'll be literally empty-headed."

Pat came back with a collection of equipment. Norden squirmed, trying to sit up. "You damned crazy fools! Do you want to be killed if I blow? Are all humans crazy?"

Miles chuckled. "Hold still. It shouldn't hurt—I don't think they put pain centers back there. We're going to leave the communication gadget in there, Bill—it may be useful, later. But that bomb's gotta come out." He chuckled again. "As to humans—well, you should know."

Victory

I

From above came the sound of men singing. Captain Duke O'Neill stopped clipping his heavy black beard to listen. It had been a long time since he'd heard such a sound—longer than the time since he'd last had a bath or seen a woman. It had never been the singing type of war. Yet now even the high tenor of old Teroini, who lay on a pad with neither legs nor arms, was mixed into the chorus. It could mean only one thing!

As if to confirm his thoughts, Burke Thompson hobbled past the cabin, stopping just long enough to shout. "Duke, we're home! They've sighted Meloa!"

"Thanks," Duke called after him, but the man was hobbling out of sight, eager to carry the good news to others.

Fourteen years, Duke thought as he dragged out his hoarded bottle of water and began shaving. Five since he'd seen Ronda on his last leave. Now the battered old wreck that was left of the flagship was less than an hour from home base, and the two other survivors of the original fleet of eight hundred were limping along behind. Three out of eight hundred—but they'd won! Meloa had her victory.

And far away, Earth could rest in unearned safety for a while.

Duke grimaced bitterly. It was no time to think of Earth now. He shucked off his patched and filthy clothes and reached for the dress grays he had laid out in advance; at least they were still in good condition, almost unused. He dressed slowly, savoring the luxury of clean clothes. The buttons gave him trouble; his left hand looked and behaved almost like a real one, but in the three years since he got it, there had been no chance to handle buttons.

Then he mastered the trick and stepped back to study the final results. He didn't look bad. Maybe a little gaunt and in need of a good haircut. But his face hadn't aged as much as he had thought. The worst part was the pasty white where his beard had covered his face, but a few days under Meloa's sun would fix that. Maybe he could spend a month with Ronda at a beach. He still had most of his share of his salary—nearly a quarter million Meloan credits; even if the rumors of inflation were true, that should be enough.

He stared at his few possessions, then shrugged and left them. He headed up the officers' lift toward the control room, where he could see Meloa swim into view and later see the homeport of Kordule as they landed.

The pilot and navigator were replacements, sent out to bring the old ship home, and their faces showed none of the jubilation of the crew. They nodded at him as he entered, staring toward the screens without expression. Aside from the blueness of their skins and the complete absence of hair, they looked almost human, and Duke had long since stopped thinking of them as anything else.

"How long?" he asked.

The pilot shrugged. "Half an hour, captain. We're too low on fuel to wait for clearance, even if control is working. Don't worry. There'll be plenty of time to catch the next ship to Earth."

"Earth?" Duke glowered at him, suspecting a joke, but there was no humor on the blue face. "I'm not going back!" Then he frowned. "What's an Earth ship doing on Meloa?"

The navigator exchanged a surprised look with the pilot, and nodded as if some signal had passed between them. His voice was as devoid of expression as his face. "Earth resumed communication with us the day the truce was signed," he answered. He paused, studying Duke. "They're giving free passage back to Earth to all Terran veterans, captain."

Nice of them, Duke thought. They were willing to let the men who'd survived come back, just as they hadn't forbidden anyone to go. Very nice! They could keep their world—and all the other coward planets like them! When the humanoid world of Meloa had been attacked by the insectile monsters from Throm, Earth could have ended the invasion in a year, as those with eyes to see had urged her. But she hadn't chosen to do so. Instead, she had stepped back on her high retreat of neutrality, and let the Throm aliens do as they liked. It wasn't the first time she'd acted like that, either.

With more than half of the inhabited planets occupied by various monsters, it seemed obvious that the humanoid planets had to make a common stand. If Meloa fell, it would be an alien stepping stone that could lead back eventually to Earth itself. And once the monsters realized that Earth was unwilling to fight, her vast resources would no longer scare them—she'd be only a rich plum, ripe for the plucking.

When Duke had been one of the first to volunteer for Meloa, he had never realized his home world could refuse to join the battle. He'd believed in Earth and humanity then. He'd waited through all the grim days when it seemed Throm must win—when the absence of replacements proved the communiqués from Meloa to be nothing but hopeful lies. But there had been no help. Earth's neutrality remained unshaken.

And now, after fourteen years in battle hell, helping to fight off a three-planet system of monsters that might have swarmed against all the humanoid races, Earth was willing to forgive him and take him back to the shame of his birthright!

"I'm staying," he said flatly. "Unless you Meloans want to kick me out now?"

The pilot swung around, dropping a quick hand on his shoulder. "Captain," he said, "that isn't something to joke about. We won't forget that there would be no Meloa today without men like you. But we can't ask you to stay. Things have changed—insanely. The news we sent to the fleet was pure propaganda!"

"We guessed that," Duke told him. "We knew the Throm ships. And when the dispatches reported all those raids without any getting through, we stopped reading them. How many did penetrate, anyhow?"

"Thirty-one full raids," the navigator said woodenly. "Thirty-one in the last four months!"

"*Thirty-one!* What happened to the home fleet?"

"We broke it up and sent it out for your replacements," the pilot answered dully. "It was the only chance we had to win."

Duke swallowed the idea slowly. He couldn't picture a planet giving up its last protection for a desperate effort to end the war on purely offensive drive. Three billion people watching the home fleet take off, knowing the skies were open for all the hell that a savage enemy could send! On Earth, the World Senate hadn't permitted the building of one battleship, for fear of reprisal.

He swung to face the ports, avoiding the expression on the faces of the two Meloans. He'd felt something of the same on his own face when he'd first inspected Throm. But it couldn't be that bad on Meloa; she'd won her hard-earned victory!

They were entering the atmosphere now, staggering down on misfiring jets. The whole planet seemed to be covered with a gray-yellow haze that spoke of countless tons of blast dust in the air. From below, Duke heard the men beginning to move toward the big entrance lock, unable to wait for the landing. But they were no longer his responsibility. He'd given up his command before embarking.

The ship came down, threatening to tilt every second, and the pilot was sweating and swearing. The haze began to clear as they neared the ground, but the ports were too high for Duke to see anything but the underside of the thick clouds. He stood up and headed for the lift, bracing himself as the ship pitched.

Suddenly there was a sickening jar and the blast cut off. The ship groaned and seemed to twist, then was still. It was the worst landing Duke had known, but they were obviously down. A second later he heard the port screech open and the thump of the landing ramp.

The singing of the men had picked up into a rough marching beat. Now abruptly it wavered. For a moment, a few voices continued, and then died away, like a record running down. There was a mutter of voices, followed by shouts that must have been the relief officers, taking over. Duke was nearly to the port before he heard the slow, doubtful sound of steps moving down the ramp. By the time he reached it, the last of the men was just leaving. He stopped, staring at the great port city of Kordule.

Most of the port was gone. Where the hangars and repair docks had been, a crater bored into the earth, still smoking faintly. A lone girder projected above it, to mark the former great control building, and a Meloan skeleton was transfixed on it near the top. It shattered to pieces as he looked and began dropping, probably from the delayed tremor of their landing.

Even the section their ship stood on was part of the crater, he saw, with an Earth bulldozer working on it. There was room for no more than ten ships now. Two of the berths were occupied by fat Earth ships, sleek and well kept. Three others held the pitted, warped hulks of Meloan battleships. There were no native freighters, and no sign of tending equipment or hangars.

The pilot had come up behind him, following his gaze. Now the man nodded. "That's it, captain. Most cities are worse. Kordule escaped the blasts until our rocket cannon failed. Got any script on you?" At Duke's nod, he pointed. "Better exchange it at the booth, before the rate gets worse. Take Earth dollars. Our silver's no good."

He held out a hand, and Duke shook it. "Good luck, captain," he said, and swung back into the ship.

Mercifully, most of Kordule was blanketed by the dust fog. There was the beginning of a series of monstrous craters where men had begun rebuilding underground, the ruined landing field, and a section of what had been the great business district. Now it was only a field of rubble, with bits of windowless walls leading up to a crazy tangle of twisted girders. Only memory could locate where the major streets had been. Over everything lay the green wash of incandite, and the wind carried the smell of a charnel house. There was no sign of the apartment where he and Ronda had lived.

He started down the ramp at last, seeing for the first time the motley crew that had come out to meet the heroes of the battle of Throm. They had spotted him already, however, and some were deserting the men at the sight of his officer's uniform. Their cries mingled into an insane, whining babble in his ears.

"…Just a scrap for an old man, general…three children at home starving…fought under Jones, captain…cigarette?"

It was a sea of clutching hands, ragged bodies with scrawny arms and bloated stomachs, trembling and writhing in its eagerness to get to him first. Then as one of the temporary officers swung back with a couple of field attendants, it broke apart to let him pass, its gaze riveted on him as he stumbled between the lines.

He spotted a billboard one man was wearing, and his eyes focused sharply on it. "Honest Feroiya," it announced. "Credit exchange. Best rates in all Kordule." Below that, chalked into a black square, was the important part: "2,345 credits the dollar."

Duke shook his head but the sign did not change. A quarter million credits for a hundred dollars. And he'd thought—

"Help a poor old widow." A trembling hand plucked at his sleeve, and he swung to face a woman in worse rags than the others, her eyes dull and unfocused, her lips mouthing the words only by habit. "Help the widow of General Dayole!"

He gasped as he recognized her. Five years before, he'd danced with her at a party given by Dayole—danced and agreed that the war was ruining them and that it couldn't get worse.

He reached into his pocket, before remembering the worthlessness of his bills. But there was half a pack of the wretched cigarettes issued the men. He tossed them to her and fled, while the other beggars scrambled toward her.

He walked woodenly across the leprous field, skirting away from the Earth ships, toward a collection of tents and tin huts that had swallowed the other veterans. Then he stopped and cursed to himself as a motorcycle sprang into life near the Earth freighters and came toward him. Naturally, they'd spotted his hair and skin color.

The well-fed smooth-faced young man swung the machine beside him. "Captain O'Neill?" he asked, but his voice indicated that he was already certain. "Hop in, sir. Director Flannery has been looking forward to meeting you!"

Duke went steadily on, not varying his steps. The machine paced him uncertainly. "Director Flannery of Earth Foreign Office, Captain O'Neill.

He requests your presence," he shouted over the purr of his machine. He started to swing ahead of the marching man.

Duke kept his eyes on his goal. When his steady steps almost brought him against the cycle, it roared out of his way. He could hear it behind him as he walked, but it faded. There was only the sight and smell of Kordule ahead of him.

II

Senators were already filing through the Presidium as Edmonds of South Africa came out of his office with Daugherty of the Foreign Office. The youngest senator stopped beside the great bronze doors, studying the situation. Then he sighed in relief. "It's all right," he told Daugherty. "Premier Lesseur's presiding."

He hadn't been sure the premier's words were a full promise before. And while he hadn't been too worried, it was good to see that the doubtful vice-premier wouldn't be presiding.

"It better be all right," the diplomat said. "Otherwise, it's my neck. Cathay's counting on Earth to help against the Kloomirians, and if Director Flannery ever finds I committed us—"

Edmonds studied the seats that were filling, and nodded with more confidence as he saw that most of the senators on whom he counted were there. "I've got enough votes, as I told you. And with Lesseur presiding, the opposition won't get far with parliamentary tricks against me. This time, Earth's going to act."

Daugherty grunted, obviously still worried, and headed up the steps to the reserved Visitors' Gallery, while Edmonds moved to his seat in the assembly room. Today he didn't even mind the fact that it was back in the section reserved for the newest members—the unknowns and unimportants, from the way the press treated them. He would be neither unknown nor unimportant, once his bill was passed, and his brief experience would only add to the miracle he was working.

Looking back on his efforts, he found the results something of a miracle to himself. It had taken two years of vote-swapping, of careful propaganda, and of compromise with his principles. That business of voting for the combined Throm-Meloa Aid Bill had been a bitter thing; but old Harding was scared sick of antagonizing the aliens by seeming partiality, and Edmonds' switch was the step needed to start the softening up.

At that, he'd been lucky. In spite of what he'd learned of the manipulation of sociological relationships, in spite of the long preparation in advertising dynamics and affective psychology, he couldn't have made it if Cathay hadn't been a human colony!

Now, though, Lesseur was calling the chamber to order. The senators quieted quickly, and there was almost complete silence as the old man picked up the paper before him.

"The Senate will consider Resolution 1843 today," Lesseur said quietly. "*A Resolution that Earth shall grant assistance to the Colony of Cathay in the event of any aggressive alien act*, proposed by Sir Alfred Edmonds. Since the required time for deliberation has elapsed, the chair will admit discussion on this resolution. Senator Edmonds!"

Edmonds was on his feet, and every face turned to him. The spotlight came down on him, blinding him to the others. He picked up the microphone, polishing the words in his mind. The vote might already be decided, but the papers would still print what he said now! And those words could mean his chance to work his way up through the Committee of Foreign Affairs and perhaps on to becoming Earth's youngest premier.

It might even mean more. Once Earth shook off her lethargy and moved to her rightful position of power and strength among the humanoid worlds, anything could happen. There was the Outer Federation being formed among the frontier worlds and the nucleus of close relations with hundreds of planets. Some day there might be the position of premier of a true Interstellar Congress!

Edmonds began quietly, listening to his voice roll smoothly from the speakers, giving the long history of Earth and her rise to a position as the richest and most respected of planets. He retold the story of how she had been the first to discover the interstellar drive, and how it had inevitably spread. He touched on the envy of the alien worlds, and the friendship of the humanoid planets that had enabled Earth to found her dozen distant colonies. He couldn't wisely discuss her cowardice and timidity in avoiding her responsibilities to help her friends; but there was another approach.

"In the forefront of every battle against alien aggression," he declaimed proudly, "have been men from Earth. Millions of our young men have fought gloriously and died gladly to protect the human—and humanoid—civilizations from whatever forms of life have menaced them. Djamboula led the forces of Hera against Clovis, just as Captain O'Neill so recently directed the final battle that saved Meloa from the hordes of Throm. In our own ranks, we have a man who spent eight long and perilous years in such a gallant struggle to save a world for humanoid decency. Senator Harding—"

From the darkened sea of faces, a voice suddenly sounded. "Will the senator yield?" It was the deep baritone of Harding.

Edmonds frowned in irritation, but nodded. A few words of confirmation on his point from Harding couldn't hurt. "I yield to the senator from Dixie," he answered.

The spotlight shifted as Harding got slowly to his feet, making a white halo of his hair. He did not look at Edmonds, but turned to face Lesseur.

"Mr. Chairman," he said, "I move that Resolution 1843 be tabled!"

"Second!" The light shifted to another man, but Edmonds had no time to see who it was as he stood staring open-mouthed at Harding.

He shouted for the chair's attention, but Lesseur brought the gavel down sharply once, and his voice rang over the speakers. "It has been moved and seconded that Resolution 1843 be tabled. The senators will now vote."

Edmonds stood frozen as the voting began. Then he dropped back hastily to press the button that would turn the square bearing his number a negative red. He saw his light flash on, while other squares were lighting. When the voting was finished, there were three such red squares in a nearly solid panel of green.

"The resolution is tabled," Lesseur announced needlessly.

Harding stood up and began moving towards the rear where Edmonds sat. The junior senator was too stunned for thought. Dimly he heard something about regrets and explanations, but the words had no meaning. He felt Harding help him to his feet and begin to guide him toward the door, where someone had already brought a shocked, white-faced Daugherty.

It was then he thought of Cathay, and what his ambition and Earth's ultimate deceit and cowardice would mean to the millions there.

III

A week of the dust-filled air of Meloa had left its mark on Captain Duke O'Neill. It had spread filth over his uniform, added another year to his face, and made waking each morning a dry-throated torture. Now he stopped at the entrance to the ship where he had been reassigned a berth for the night shift. An attendant handed him a small bottle, three biscuits, and a magazine. He tasted the chemically purified water sickly, stuffed the three ersatz biscuits into his pocket, and moved down the ramp, staring at the magazine.

It was from Earth, of course, since no printing was being done yet on Meloa. It must have come in on one of the three big Earth freighters he'd heard land during the night. Tucked into it was another of the brief notes he'd been receiving: "Director Flannery will be pleased to call on Captain O'Neill at the captain's convenience."

He shredded the note as he went across the field; he started to do the same with the news magazine, until the headlines caught his attention.

Most of the news meant nothing to him. But he skimmed the article on the eleventh planet to join the Outer Federation; the writer was obviously biased against the organization, but Duke nodded approvingly. At least someone was doing something. He saw that Cathay was in for trouble. Earth was living up to her old form! Then he shoved the magazine into his pocket and trudged on toward the veteran's reassignment headquarters.

Machinery was being moved from the Earth freighters, and Duke swore again. Five billion Earthmen would read of their "generosity" to Meloa, and any guilt they felt for their desertion would vanish in a smug satisfaction at their charity. Smugness was easy in a world without dust or carrion smell or craters that had been factories.

There were only a few Meloans in the crude tent that served as their headquarters. Duke went back toward the cubbyhole where a thin, haggard man sat on a broken block behind a makeshift desk.

The hairless blue head shook slowly while the man's eyes dropped hungrily to the paper in Duke's pocket and away again guiltily. "No work, Captain O'Neill. Unless you can operate some of those Earth machines we're getting?"

Duke grimaced, passing the magazine over to hands that trembled as they took it. His education was in ultra-literary creative writing, his experience in war. And here, where there was the whole task of rebuilding a planet to be done, the ruin of tools and power made what could be done too little for even the few who were left. There was no grain to reap or wood to cut after the killing gas from Throm had ruined vegetation; there were no workable mines where all had been blasted closed. Transportation was gone. And the economy had passed beyond hand tools, leaving too few of those. Even whole men were idle, and his artificial hand could never replace a real one for carrying rubble.

"Director Flannery has been asking for you again," the man told him.

Duke ignored it "What about my wife?"

The Meloan frowned, reaching for a soiled scrap of paper. "We may have something. One of her former friends thinks she was near this address. We'll send someone out to investigate, if you wish, captain; but it's still pretty uncertain."

"I'll go myself," Duke said harshly. He picked up the paper, recognizing the location as one that had been in the outskirts.

The man behind the desk shook his head doubtfully. Then he shrugged, and reached behind him for a small automatic. "Better take this—and watch your step! There are two bullets left."

Duke nodded his thanks and turned away, dropping the gun into his pocket. Behind him he heard a long sigh and the rustle of a magazine being opened quickly.

It was a long walk. At first, he traced his way through streets that had been partially blasted clear. After the first mile, however, he was forced to hunt around or over the litter and wreckage, picking the way from high spot to high spot. There were people about, rooting through the debris, or patrolling in groups. He drew the automatic and carried it in his hand, in plain sight. Some stared at him and some ignored him, but none came too close.

Once he heard shouting and a group ran across his path, chasing a small rodent. He heard a wild tumult begin, minutes later. When he passed the spot where they had stopped, a fight was going on, apparently over the kill.

At noon he stopped to drink sparingly of his water and eat one of the incredibly bad biscuits. What food there was available or which could be received from the Earth freighters was being mixed into them, but it wasn't enough. The workers got a little more, and occasionally someone found a few cans under the rubble. The penalty for not turning such food in was revocation of all food allotment, but there was a small black market where unidentified cans could be bought for five Earth dollars, and some found its way there. The same black market sold the few remaining cigarettes at twice that amount each.

It was beginning to thunder to the north as he stood up and went wearily on, and the haze was thickening. He tried to hurry, uncertain of how dark it would get. If he got caught now, he'd never be able to return before night. He stumbled on a broken street sign, decoding what was left of it, and considered. Then he sighed in relief. As he remembered it, he was almost there.

The buildings had been lower here, and the rubble was thinner. There seemed to be more people about, judging by the traces of smoke that drifted out of holes or through glassless windows. He saw none outside, however.

He was considering trying one of the places from which smoke was coming when he saw the little boy five hundred feet ahead. He started forward, but the kid popped into what must have been a cellar once. Duke stopped, calling quietly.

This time it was a girl of about sixteen who appeared. She sidled closer, her eyes fixed on his hair. Her voice piped out suddenly, scared and desperate. "You lonesome, Earthman?" Under the fright, it was a grotesque attempt at coquetry. She edged nearer, staring at him. "I won't roll you, honest!"

"All I want is information," he told her thickly. "I'm looking for a woman named Ronda—Ronda O'Neill. She was my wife."

The girl considered, shaking her head. Her eyes grew wider as he pulled out a green Earth bill, but she didn't move. Then, as he added the two remaining biscuits, she nodded quickly, motioning him forward. "Mom might know," she said.

She ran ahead, and soon an older woman shuffled up the broken steps. In her arms was a baby, dead or in a coma, and she rocked it slowly, moaning softly as she listened to his questions. She grunted finally, and reached out for the reward. Shuffling ahead of him, she went up the rubble-littered street and around a corner, to point. "Go in," she said. "Ronda'll be back."

Duke shoved the crude door back and stepped into what was left of a foyer in a cheap apartment house. The back had been blasted away, but the falling building had sealed over one corner, covering it from most of the weather. Light came from the shattered window, showing a scrap of blanket laid out on the floor near a few possessions. At first, nothing identified the resident in any way, and he wondered if it were a trap. Then he bent over a broken bracelet, and his breath caught sharply. The catch still worked, and a faded miniature of him was inside the little holder. Ronda's!

Duke dropped onto the blanket, trying to imagine what Ronda would be like, and to picture the reunion. But the present circumstances wouldn't fit into anything he could imagine. He could only remember the bravely smiling girl who had seen him off five years before.

He heard a babble of voices outside, but didn't look out. The walk had exhausted him. Hard as the bed was, it was better than standing up. Anyhow, if Ronda came back, he was pretty sure she would be warned of his presence.

He slept fitfully, awakened by the smells and sounds from outside. Once he thought someone looked in, but he couldn't be sure. He turned over, almost decided to investigate, and dozed off again.

It was the hoarse sound of breathing and a soft shuffle that wakened him that time. His senses jarred out of slumber with a feeling of wrongness that reacted in instant caution. He let his eyes slit open, relieved to find there was still light.

Between him and the door, a figure was creeping up on hands and knees. The rags of clothes indicated it was a woman and the knife in one hand spelled murder!

Duke snapped himself upright to a sitting position, his hand darting for the gun in his pocket. A low shriek came from the woman, and she lunged forward, the knife rising. There was no time for the gun. He caught her wrist, twisting savagely. She scratched and writhed, but the knife spun from her grasp. With a moan, she collapsed across his knees.

He turned her face up, staring at it unbelievingly. "Ronda!"

Bloated and stained, lined with fear, it bore a faint resemblance to the girl he had known. Now a fleeting look of cunning crossed her face briefly, to be replaced with an attempt at dawning recognition. "Duke!" She gasped it, then made a sound that might have been meant for joy. She stumbled to her knees, reaching out to him. But her eyes swiveled briefly toward the knife. "Duke, it's you!"

He pushed her back and reached for the knife. He was sure she'd known who it was—had probably been the one who awakened him by looking in through the broken window. "Why'd you try to kill me Ronda? You saw who it was. If you needed money, you know I'd give you anything I had. Why?"

"Not for money." She twisted from him and slumped limply against a broken wall. Tears came into her eyes. This time the catch in her voice was real. "I know…I know, Duke. And I wanted to see you, to talk to you, too." She shook her head slowly. "What can I do with money? I wanted to wake you up like old times. But Mrs. Kalaufa—she led you here—she said—I—"

He waited, but she didn't finish. She traced a pattern on the dust of the floor, before looking up again. "You've never been really hungry! Not that hungry! You wouldn't understand."

"Even with the dole, you can't starve that much in the time since Kordule was bombed," he protested. He gagged as he thought of the meaning he'd guessed from her words, expecting her to deny it.

She shrugged. "In ten years, you can do anything. Oh, sure, you came back on leave and we lived high. Everything was fine here, wasn't it? Sure it was, for you. They briefed me on where I should take you, so there'd be good food ready. They kept a few places going for the men who came back on leave. We couldn't ruin your morale!"

She laughed weakly, and let the sound die away slowly. "How do you think we sent out the food and supplies for the fleet the last three years, after the blockade on our supplies from friendly worlds? Why do you think there was no more leave for you? Because they didn't think you brave soldiers could stand just seeing how the rest of us lived! And you think you had it tough! Watch the sky for the enemy while your stomach hopes for the sound that might be a rat. Hide three cans of food you'll be shot for hoarding—because there is nothing else important in the world. And then have a man steal them from you when the raids come! What does a soldier know of war?"

The sickness inside him grew into a knot, but he still couldn't fully believe what she was saying. "But cannibalism—"

"No." She shook her head with a faint trace of his own disgust. "No, Duke. Mrs. Kalaufa told me…you're not really the same race—Not as close as you are to an Earth animal, and you don't call that cannibalism. Nobody on Meloa has ever been a cannibal—yet! How much money do you have, Duke?"

He took it out and handed it to her. She counted it mechanically and handed it back. "Not enough. You can't take me away when you leave here."

"I'm not leaving," he told her. He dropped the money back on the blanket beside her.

She stared at him for a moment and then pulled herself up to her feet, moving toward the door. "Good-bye, Duke. And get off Meloa. You can't help us any more. And I don't want you here when I get desperate enough to remember you might take me back. I like you too much for that, even now."

He took a step toward her, and she ducked.

"Get out!" She screamed it at him. "Do you think I can stand looking at you without drooling any longer? Do you want me to call Mrs. Kalaufa for help?"

Through the open door, he saw Mrs. Kalaufa across the street, still cradling the child. As the door slammed shut behind him, the woman screamed, either as a summons or from fear that he'd seek revenge on her. He saw other heads appear, with frantic eyes that stared sullenly at the gun he carried. He stumbled down the street, where rain was beginning to fall, conscious that it would be night before he got back to the port. He no longer cared.

There was no place for him here, he now saw. He was still an Earthman, and Earthmen were always treated as a race apart somehow. He didn't belong. But there were still the recruiting stations there; so long as war existed, there had to be stations. He headed for the fat ships of Earth that squatted complacently on the wrecked port.

IV

Prince Queeth of Sugfarth had left the royal belt behind, and only a plain band encircled his round little body as he trotted along, his four legs making almost no sound. His double pair of thin arms and the birdlike head on his long neck bobbled excitedly in time to his steps. Once he stopped to glance across the black stone buildings of the city as they shone in the dull red of the sun, toward the hill where his father's palace was lighted brightly for the benefit of his Earth guests. Queeth touched his ears together ceremoniously and then trotted on, until he came to the back door of his group's gymnasium. He whistled the code word and the door opened automatically.

The whole group was assembled, though it was past sleep week for most of them. Their ears clicked together, but they waited silently as he curled himself up in the official box. Then Krhal, the merchant viscount, whistled questioningly. "This will have to be important, Queeth."

The prince bobbed his ears emphatically. "It is. My father's guests have all the news, and I learned everything. It won't be as long as we thought." He paused, before delivering the big news. "The bipeds of Kloomiria are going to attack Cathay. There'll be official war there within two weeks!"

He saw them exchanging hasty signals, but again it was Krhal who voiced their question. "And you think that is important, Queeth? What does it offer us? Cathay is a human colony. Earth will have to declare war with her. And with Earth's wealth, it will be over before we could arrive."

"Earth has already passed a resolution that neutrality will apply to colonies as well as to other planets!" This time the whistles were sharper. Krhal had difficulty believing it at first. "So Earth really is afraid to fight? That must mean those rumors that she has no fleet are true. Our ancestors thought so, and even planned to attack her, before the humanoids defeated us. The ancestor king believed that even a single ship fully armed might conquer her."

"It could be," Queeth admitted. "But do you agree that this is the news for which we've waited so long?"

There was a quick flutter of ears. "It's our duty," Krhal agreed. "In a war between Cathay and Kloomiria, we can't remain neutral if we're ever to serve our friends. Well, the ship is ready!"

That came as a surprise to Queeth. He knew the plans were well along, but not that they were completed. As merchant viscount, and second-degree adult, Krhal was entitled to a tenth of his father's interests. He'd chosen the biggest freighter and the balance in fluid assets, to the pleasure of his father—who believed he was planning an honorable career of exploring.

"The conversion completed?" Queeth asked. "But the planet bombs—!"

"Earth supplied them on the last shipment. I explained on the order that I was going to search uninhabited planets for minerals."

Queeth counted the group again, and was satisfied. There were enough. With a ship of that size, fully staffed and armed, they would be a welcome addition to any fleet. They might be enough to tip the balance for victory, in fact. And while Cathay and Kloomiria lay a long way on the other side of Earth's system, the drivers were fast enough to cover it in two weeks.

"Does your father know?" Krhal asked.

Queeth smirked. "Would you tell him? He still believes along with the Earth ambassador that the warrior strain was ruined among our people when we lost the war with the humanoids."

"Maybe it was," Krhal said doubtfully. "In four generations, it could evolve again. And there are the books and traditions from which we trained. If even a timid race such as those of Earth can produce warriors like O'Neill—a mere poet—why can't the Sugfarth do better? Particularly when Earth rebuilt factories for us to start our shipbuilding anew."

"Then we join the war," the prince decided

There was a series of assent signals from the group.

"Tonight," he suggested, and again there was only assent.

Krhal stood up, setting the course for the others. When the last had risen Queeth uncurled himself and rose from the box. "We'll have to pass near Earth," he suggested as they filed out toward the hangers where Krhal kept his ship. "Maybe we should show our intentions there!"

There was a sudden whistle of surprise. Then the assent was mounting wildly. Queeth trotted ahead toward the warship, making his attack plans over again as he realized he was a born leader who could command such enthusiasm. He had been doubtful before, in spite of his study of elementary statistical treatment of relationships.

The lights in the palace showed that the Earth guests were still celebrating as the great, heavily-laden warship blasted up and headed toward Earth.

V

Duke O'Neill found a corner of the lounge where no Earthman was near and dropped down with the magazine and papers, trying to catch up on the currents of the universe as they affected the six hundred connected worlds. Most of the articles related to Earth alone, and he skipped them. He found one on the setup of the Outer Federation finally. The humanoid planets there were in a pocket of alien worlds, and union had been almost automatic. It was still loose, but it seemed to have sound enough a basis.

If Earth had been willing to come out of its shell and risk some of its fat trading profits, there could have been an even stronger union that would have driven warlike thoughts out of the minds of all the aliens.

Instead, she seemed to be equally interested in building up her potential enemies and ruining her friends. Duke had watched a showing of new films on the work being done on Throm the night before, and he was still sick from it. Throm had lost the war, but by a military defeat, not by thirty-one unprotected raids on all her surface. She still had landing fields equipped for Earth ships, and the big freighters, spewing out foods, equipment and even heavy machinery for her rebuilding. Throm was already on the road back. Meloa had to wait until she could pull herself up enough to build fields.

Duke turned his eyes to the port. The ship had stopped at Clovis on the way back to Earth. From where he sat, he could see almost Earthlike skyscrapers stretching up in a great city. The landing field was huge, and there were rows on rows of factories building more of the freighters that stubbed the field.

It seemed impossible, when he remembered that only forty years had passed since Djamboula's suicide raid had finally defeated the fungoid creatures of the planet and since the survivors' vows to repay all Earthmen for their defeat. They were a prolific race, of course—but without help from Earth, the factories would be shacks and the rockets and high drive ships would be only memories.

He wondered how many were cursing their ancestors for making the mistake of attacking a neighboring humanoid planet instead of Earth, only two days away on high drive. By now, they knew that Earth was defenseless. And yet, they seemed content to go on with their vows forgotten. Duke couldn't believe it. Down underground, beyond Earth inspection, they could have vast stockpiles of weapons, ready to install in their ships within days.

How could Earth risk it, unless she had her own stock of hidden ships and weapons? Yet if she did, he was sure that it would have been impossible not to use them in defense of the colony of Cathay.

He stared out, watching the crewmen mixing with the repulsive alien natives, laughing as they worked side by side. There must be some factor he didn't understand, but he'd never found it—nor did he know anyone who had guessed it.

He stirred, uncomfortable with his own thoughts. But it wasn't fear for Earth that bothered him. It was simply that sooner or later some alien race would risk whatever unknown power the others feared. If the aliens won, the vast potential power of Earth would then be turned against all the humanoid races of the universe. Humanity could be driven from the galaxy.

He turned the pages, idly glancing at the headlines. It was hard to realize that the paper wasn't right off the presses of Earth; it must have been brought out to Clovis on the latest ship. He checked the date, and frowned in surprise. According to the rough calendar he'd kept, it was the current date. Somewhere he must have lost track of two days. How much else had he lost sight of during the long years of war?

A diagram caught his attention almost at once as he turned to another magazine. It was a behemoth ship, bigger than any he had ever seen, and built like the dream of a battleship, though it was listed as a freighter. He scanned it, mentally converting it. With a few like that, Meloa could have won during the first year.

Then he swore as he saw it was part of an article on the progress of some alien world known as Sugfarth—by the article, a world of former warriors, once dedicated to the complete elimination of humanoids!

He saw Flannery coming along the deck at that moment, and he picked up the magazine, heading for his cabin. He'd ignored previous summons on the thin excuse of not feeling well. He had no desire to talk with Earthmen. It was bad enough to take their charity back to Earth and to have to stay on the planet until he could sign on with the Outer Federation. His memories were ugly enough, without having them refreshed.

But Flannery caught him as he was opening the door to his cabin. The director was huge, with heavy, strong features and a body that looked too robust for the white hair and the age that showed around his eyes. His voice was tired, however, showing his years more plainly than his looks.

"Captain O'Neill," he said quickly. "Stop jousting with windmills. It's time you grew up. Besides, I've got a job for you."

"Does my charity passage demand an interview, director?" Duke asked.

The other showed no offense, unfortunately. He smiled wryly. "If I choose, it does. I'm in command of this ship, as well as head of the Foreign Office. May I come in?"

"I can't keep you out," Duke admitted. He dropped onto the couch, sprawling out, while the other found the single chair.

Flannery picked up the magazine and glanced through it. "So, you're interested in the Outer Federation?" he asked. "Don't be. It doesn't have a chance. In a week or so, you'll see it shot. And I don't mean we'll wreck it. They've picked their own doom, against all the advice we could give them. Care to have a drink sent down while I talk?"

Duke shook his head. "I'd rather cut it short."

"Hotheads," Flannery told the walls thoughtfully, "make the best men obtainable, once they're tamed. Nothing beats an idealist who can face facts. And the intelligent ones usually grow up. Captain, I've studied your strategy against Throm on that last drive after Doyale was killed. Brilliant! I need a good man, and I can pay for one. If you give me a chance, I can also show you why you should take it. Know anything about how Earth got started on its present course?"

"Dumb luck and cowardice, as far as I can see," Duke answered.

When Earth discovered the first inefficient version of the high drive, she had found herself in a deserted section of the universe, with the nearest inhabited star system months away. The secret of the drive couldn't be kept, of course, but the races who used it to build war fleets found it easier to fight with each other than with distant Earth. Later, when faster drives were developed, Earth was protected by the buffer worlds she had rebuilt.

Flannery grinned. "Luck—and experience. We learned something from our early nuclear-technological wars. We learned more from the interstellar wars of others. We decided that any planet ruined by such war wouldn't fight again—the women and children who lived through that hell would see to it—unless new hatreds grew up during the struggle back. So we practically pauperized ourselves at first to see that they recovered too quickly for hate and fear. We also began digging into the science of how to manipulate relationships—Earth's greatest discovery—to set up a system that would work. It paid off for us in the long run."

"So what's all that got to do with me?" Duke asked. He'd heard of the great science of Earth and her ability to manipulate all kinds of relationships before, spoken of in hush hush terms when he was still in college. But he'd quit believing in fairy tales even before then. Now he was even sicker of Earth's self-justification.

Flannery frowned, and then shrugged. "It's no secret I need a good man on Throm, and you're the logical candidate, if I can pound some facts into your head. I've found that sending an Earthman they know as a competent enemy works wonders. Not at first—there's hostility for a while—but in the long run it gives, them a new slant on us."

"Then you'd better get an Earthman," Duke snapped. "You're talking to a citizen of Meloa! By choice!"

"I hadn't finished my explanation," Flannery reminded.

Duke snorted. "I was brought up on explanations. I heard men spouting about taming the aliens when I first learned to talk—as if they were wild animals. I read articles on how the Clovisem and those things from Sugfarth needed kindness. It's the same guff I heard about how to handle lions. But the men doing the talking weren't in the ring; and I noticed the ringmaster carried a whip and gun. He knew the beasts. I know the aliens of Throm."

"From fighting them? From hating them? Or from being more afraid of them than you think Earth is, captain? I've talked to more aliens than you've ever seen."

"And the Roman diplomats laughed at the soldiers who told them the Goths were getting ready to sack Rome."

Flannery stared at him in sudden amusement. "We aren't in an Empire period, O'Neill. But you might look up what the Romans did to conquered people during the Republic, when Rome was still growing. Captain, I'm not underrating the aliens!"

"Tame aliens! Or ones faking tameness. You've seen them smiling, maybe. I saw the other side."

The old man sighed heavily and reached for his shirt. He began unbuttoning it and pulling it over his head. "You've got a nice prosthetic hand," he said. "Now take a look at some real handiwork!"

There was a strap affair around his shoulders, with a set of complicated electronic controls slipped into the muscle fibers. From them, both arms hung loose, unattached at the shoulder blades. Further down, another affair of webbing went around his waist.

"Only one leg is false," he explained, "but the decorations are real. They came from a highly skilled torturer. I've had my experience with aliens. Clovisem, if you're curious. I was the second in command on Djamboula's volunteer raid, forty years ago."

Duke dropped his eyes from the scars. For a second, he groped for words of apology. Then the cold, frozen section of his brain swallowed the emotions. "I've seen a woman with a prosthetic soul," he said bitterly. "Only she didn't turn yellow because of what the aliens did!"

Red spots shot onto Flannery's cheeks and one of the artificial arms jerked back as savagely as a real one. He hesitated, then reached for his shirt. "O.K., squawman!"

The word had no meaning for Duke, though he knew it was an insult. But he couldn't respond to it. He fumbled through his memories, trying to place it. Something about Indians—

Flannery began buttoning his pants over the shirt. "I'm out of bounds, captain," he said more quietly. "I hope you don't know the prejudices behind that crack. But you win. If you ever want the rest of the explanation, look me up."

He closed the door behind him softly and went striding evenly up the passage.

Duke frowned after him. The talk had gotten under his skin. If there were things he didn't know—

Then he swore at himself. There was plenty he didn't know. But the carefully developed indoctrination propaganda of the top Earth psychologists wasn't the answer he wanted.

He'd have to make his stay on Earth shorter than he'd planned. If they could get to a man who had served under Djamboula and convince him that Clovisem were nice house pets, it was little wonder they could wrap the rest of Earth around their psychological fingers.

Too bad their psychology wasn't adjusted to aliens!

VI

Barth Nevesh was nearly seven feet tall, and his cat-shaped ears stuck up another four inches above his head. Even among the people of Kel he was a big man, but to the representatives of the other humanoid worlds of the Federation, he seemed a giant. The thick furs he wore against the heavy chill of the room added to his apparent size, and the horns growing from his shoulders lifted his robes until he seemed to have no neck.

Now he stood up, driving his heavy fist down against the big wooden table. "The question is, do we have the answer or not?" he roared. "You say we do. Logic says we do. Then let's act on it!"

The elfin figure of Lemillulot straightened up at the other end of the table. "Not so fast, commander. Nobody questions the power of your fleet. Nobody doubts that we have the only possible answer to the aliens that Earth is helping to take over our universe—strength through unity. But is it as good as it can be?"

"How better?" Barth roared again. "Every world in this alien pocket has been building its strength since the Earthmen's ships first reached here and showed us space travel was possible. We've seen the stinking aliens get the same ships. But now we've got something they can't resist—a Federation, in spite of all Earth could do to stop us. If all our fleets strike at once, no alien world can resist—and we can stop merely holding them back. Wipe them out, one by one, I say! The only good alien is a dead alien!"

There was a lot of talk—more than Barth usually heard or contributed in a month. Lemillulot was the focus of most of it. The little man would never be satisfied. He wanted all the humanoid worlds organized, and by now it was plain that Earth's influence would be too strong outside of their own section.

Their accomplishments were already enough. United as they were, the Federation was clearly invincible. Their fleets were at full size and the crews were thoroughly trained. No other time would be better.

There had already been a stir of ship-building on the alien worlds, since the first word of the Federation had somehow leaked out. The Federation position was as good as it would ever be—and with eleven fleets working together, nothing better was needed.

"Knock them down with the long shells, haze them to base with interceptors, and then rip their worlds with planet bombs," Barth repealed his plans. "We can do it in six hours for a planet—we can start at the strongest, Neflis, and work down through the weakest, to make up for our losses. And if the Earth forces start moving in to rebuild them—well, I've been thinking the Federation could use a little more wealth and power!"

"Humanoids don't attack humanoids," Lemillulot protested.

The snarling, dog face of Sra from Chumkt opened in a grin, and his sly voice held a hint of a chuckle. "Or so Earth keeps preaching. But Earthmen aren't humanoids. They're humans!"

He laughed softly at his own wit. There were rumbles of uncertainty, but Barth saw that the seed had taken root. If they kept working together, he and Sra could force it to ripen soon enough.

"That can. wait," Barth decided. "The question is, do we attack Neflis, and when? I say now!"

It took an hour more for the decision. But there would be only one answer, and the final vote was unanimous. The fleets would take off from their home worlds and rendezvous near the barren sun; from there, they would proceed in a group, under the control of Barth, toward the alien world of Neflis.

The commander checked his chronometer as the delegates went to send their coded reports to their home worlds. He had the longest distance to lead his fleet, and there was no time for delay.

Outside, the harsh snow crackled under his feet, and a layer of storm clouds cut off the wan heat of Kel's sun. He drew in a deep breath, watching the swirl of white as he exhaled. It was a good world—a world to build men. It was the world from which a leader should come.

The fleet would be all his within a day. And for a time, it would be busy at the work of wiping out the nearby aliens. After that—well, there were other aliens further out toward the last frontiers of exploration. With care, the fleet could be kept busy for years.

Barth was remembering his histories, and the armies that had been swept together. In a few years, fighting men began to think of themselves as a people apart, and loyalty to their birthplace gave way to loyalty to their leader. Five years should be enough. Then there could be more than a Federation; there could be the empire among the worlds that had been his lifelong dream.

But first, there was Earth. He snorted to himself as he reached the ships of his fleet. Missionaries! Spreading their soft fear through the universe. In five years, his fleet should be ready for ten times the power of any single planet—including Earth. Sra would be the only problem in his way. But that could be met later. For the moment, the man from Chumkt was useful.

Barth strode up the ramp of his flagship, shouting out to his men as he went. There was no need of signals. They had been primed and waiting for days, ready to follow him up.

He dropped to the control seat, staring at the little lights that would tell him of their progress. "Up ship!" he shouted, and from the metal halls and caverns of the ship other voices echoed his cry.

The *Wind Dragon* leaped upwards sharply. Behind, as the red lights showed, four hundred others charged into the sky and the open space beyond. Barth sat at the great screen, watching as they drew on steadily toward the rendezvous, mulling over his plans.

They were three hours out from Kel when he turned the control over to his lieutenant and went below, where his table was laden with the smoking cheer of good green meat and ale. With a sigh of contentment, he threw back his outer robe and prepared to forget everything until he had dined.

He was humming hoarsely to himself as he cut a piece of the meat and stuck it on his left shoulder horn, within reach of his teeth. Maybe a little of the baked fish would blend well—

The emergency drum blasted through the ship as he lifted the knife. Swearing and tearing at the flesh near his mouth, he leaped up and forward toward the control room. He heard voices shouting, something about a fleet. Then he was at the screens where he could see for himself.

Five million miles ahead, another fleet was assembled, where none should be from any of the Federation worlds! His eyes swept sideways across the screen, estimating the number. It was impossible. There weren't a quarter of that number in the fleet of any world, humanoid or alien!

Barth flipped on the microresolver, twisting the wheel that sent it racing across the path of the fleet ahead. His eyes confirmed what his mind had already recognized.

The aliens had their own federation. There were ships of every type there, grouped in units. Thirteen alien worlds were combined against the Outer Federation. For a breath he hesitated, ready to turn back and defend Kel while there was time. But it would never work. One fleet would never be enough to defend the planet against the combined aliens.

"Cluster!" he barked into the communicator. "Out rams and up speed. Prepare for breakthrough!"

If they could hit the aliens at full drive and cut through the weaker center, they could still rendezvous with the other fleets. The combined strength might be enough. And the gods help Kel if the aliens refused to follow him!

Earth, he thought; Earth again, coddling and protecting aliens, forming them into a conspiracy against the humanoid worlds. If Kel or any part of the Federation survived, that debt would be paid.

VII

Earth lay fat and smug under the sun, seemingly unchanged since Duke had left it. For generations the populace had complained that they were draining themselves dry to rebuild other worlds, but they had grown rich on the investment. It was the only planet where men worked shorter and shorter hours to give them more leisure in which to continue a frantic effort to escape boredom. It was also the only world where the mention of aliens made men think of their order books instead of their weapons.

Duke walked steadily away from the grotesquely elaborate landing field. He had less than thirty cents in his pocket, but his breakfast aboard had left him satisfied for the moment. He turned onto a wider street, heading the long distance across the city toward the most probable location of the recruiting stations.

The Outer Federation station would be off the main section, since the official line was disapproving of such a union. But he was sure there would be one. The system of recruiting was a tradition too hard to break. Earth used it as an escape valve for her troublemakers. And since such volunteers made some of the best of fighters, they had already decided the outcome of more than one war. By carefully juggling the attention given the stations, Earth could influence the battles without seeming to do so.

The air was thick with the smell of late summer, and there was pleasure in that, until Duke remembered the odor of Meloa, and its cause. Later the cloying perfume of women mixed with the normal industrial odors of the city, until his nose was overdriven to the point of cutoff. He saw things in the shop windows that he had forgotten, but he had no desire for them. And over everything came the incessant yammer of voices saying nothing, radios blaring, television babbling, and vending machines shouting.

He gave up at last and invested half his small fund in a subway. It was equally noisy, but it took less time. Beside him, a fungoid creature from Clovis was busy practicing silently on its speaking machine, but nobody else seemed to notice.

Duke's head was spinning when he reached the surface again. He stopped to let it clear, wondering if he'd ever found this world home. It wouldn't matter soon, though; once he was signed up at the recruiting station, there would be no time to think.

He saw the sign, only a few blocks from where the recruiting posters for Meloa had been so long ago. It was faded, but he could read the lettering, and he headed for it. As he had expected, it was on a dirty back street, where the buildings were a confusion of shipping concerns and cheaper apartment houses.

He knew something was wrong when he was a block away. There was no pitch being delivered by a barking machine, and no idle group watching the recruiting efforts on the street. In fact, nobody was in front of the vacant store that had been used, and the big posters were ripped down.

He reached the entrance and stopped. The door was half open, but it carried a notice that the place had been closed by order of the World Foreign Office. Through the dirty glass, Duke could see a young man of about twenty sitting slumped behind a battered desk.

He stepped in and the boy looked up apathetically. "You're too late, captain. Neutrality went on hours ago when the first word came through. Caught me just ready to ship out—after two lousy months recruiting here, I have to be the one stranded."

"You're lucky," Duke told him mechanically, not sure whether he meant it or not. Oddly, the idea of a kid like this mixed up in an interplanetary war bothered him. He turned to go, then hesitated. "Got a newspaper or a directory around that I could borrow?"

The boy fished a paper out of a wastebasket. "It's all yours, captain. The whole place is yours. Slam the door when you go out. I'm going over to the Cathay office."

"I'll go along," Duke offered. The address of that place was all he'd wanted from the paper. He'd have preferred the Federation to joining up with Earth colonists, but beggars never made good choosers.

The kid shook his head. He dragged open a drawer, found a slip of paper, and handed it over. It was a notice that the legal maximum age for recruiting had been reduced to thirty! "You'd never make it, captain," he said.

Duke looked at the paper in his hands and at the dim reflection of his face in a window. "No," he agreed. "I didn't make it."

He followed the boy to the door, staring out at the street, thick with its noises and smells. He dropped to the doorsill and looked briefly up at the sky where two ships were cutting out to space. Flannery had known the regulation and hadn't told him. Yet it was his own fault; the age limit was lower now, but there had always been a limit. He had simply forgotten that he'd grown older.

He found it hard to realize he'd been no older than the kid when he'd signed up for the war with Throm.

For a while he sat looking at the street, trying to realize what had happened to him. It took time to face the facts. He listened with half his attention as a small group of teen age boys came from one of the buildings and began exchanging angry insults with another group apparently waiting for them on the corner. From their attitudes, some of them were carrying weapons and were half-eager, half-afraid to use them. It was hard to remember back to the time when such things had seemed important to him. He considered putting a stop to the argument, before it got out of hand, since no police were near; but adults had no business in kid fights. He watched them retreat slowly back to an alley, still shouting to work up their courage. Maybe he should be glad that there was even this much fire left under the smug placidity of Earth.

Finally, he picked up the newspaper from where he'd dropped it and began turning back to the want ads. His needs were few, and there should be dishwashing jobs, at least, somewhere in the city. He still had to eat and find some place to sleep. A headline glared up at him, catching his attention. He started to skim the story, and then read it thoroughly. Things weren't going at all as he'd expected in the Outer Worlds, if the account were true; and usually, such battle reports weren't altered much.

The aliens had developed a union of their own—if anything, a stronger one than the humanoids had. Apparently they'd chased the Federation ships into some kind of a trap. Losses on both sides were huge. And raids had begun on all the alien and humanoid planets.

He scowled as he came to the latest developments. One section of the Federation fleet under Sra of Chumkt had pulled out, accusing the faction headed by Barth Nevesh of leading the aliens to the humanoid rendezvous. Kel's leader had gone after the deserters, fought it out with them in the middle of the larger battle, killed Sra, and declared himself the head of the whole Federation. It was madness that should have led to complete annihilation; only the fumbling, uncoordinated leadership of the aliens had saved the humanoid fleets. And now the Federation was coming apart at the seams, with Barth Nevesh frantically scurrying around to catch up the pieces.

Duke read it through again, but with no added information. It was a shock to know that the aliens had combined against the humanoid Federation. Still, looking back on that, he could begin to see that they would have to, once they knew of the Federation. But the rest of the account—

Flannery's words came back to him. The director had been right. His prediction was already coming true, after only three days—unless he had either had prior knowledge or juggled things to make it come true! Duke considered it, but he could see no way Flannery could either learn or act in advance of the arrival of the ship on Earth. The Federation was farther from Meloa than from this planet. He'd been forced to depend on the same accounts Duke had read in the papers on board the ship.

Then Duke glanced at the date on the current paper idly, and his thoughts jolted completely out of focus. It was dated only three days later than the paper he had seen when they were docked on Clovis! Without instantaneous communication, it was impossible. He might have been mistaken about the date before, but—

Nothing fit. The feeling of uncertainty came back, crowding out the minor matter of his memory of the date. He stared at the richness of even this poor section of an Earth that huddled here as if afraid of its own shadows, yet reeked with self-satisfaction. He thought of Meloa and Throm, and the gallant try at Federation that had been made on the Outer Worlds. Strength had to lie in union and action; yet all the evidence seemed to say that it lay in timidity and sloth.

Reluctantly he turned the page away from the news, to seek for the job sections. From the alley, there came the sound of a police whistle, and shouts that faded into the distance. It was probably the breaking up of the teen-age argument. A few people ran by, heading for the excitement, but Duke had lost all interest. A taxi stopped nearby and he heard a patter that might have been that of children's feet, but he didn't look up.

Then a sharper whistle shrilled almost in his ear and he twisted around to stare at a creature who was gazing at him. Four spindly legs led up to a globular body encased in a harness-like contraption. Above the body, two pairs of thin arms were waving about, while a long neck ended in a birdlike head, topped by two large ears.

The ears suddenly seemed to shimmer in the air, and a surprisingly human voice sounded. "You're Captain Duke O'Neill!"

Before Duke could answer, a small hand came out quickly to find his and begin shaking it, while the ears twittered on in excitement. "I'm honored to meet you, Captain O'Neill. I've been studying your work against Throm. Amazingly clever strategy! Permit me—I'm Queeth, lately a prince of Sugfarth. Perhaps you noticed our ship? No, of course not. You must have landed at the government field. My crew and I are on the way to the war about to begin between Kloomiria and Cathay."

"Why tell me about it?" Duke asked roughly. Sugfarth—the ship he'd seen diagrammed had come from there. If one of those titans was to be used against Cathay, Earth's colony was doomed. And the impertinent little monster—!

The creature tried to imitate a shrug with his upper set of arms. "Why not, captain? We're registered here as a recruiting ship for Cathay, so it's no secret. We thought we might as well carry along some of the men going out to help, since we had to pass near Earth anyhow. And I dropped by here in the hope that there might be a few who had failed to join the Federation and who would like to switch to Cathay."

"Wait a minute," Duke said. He studied the alien, trying to rake what he'd learned from the article out of his memory. But no record of subtlety or deceit had been listed there. The Sugfarth were supposed to be honest—in fact, they'd been one of the rare races to declare their war in advance. Somehow, too, the words had a ring of truth in them. "For Cathay?"

"Certainly, captain. For whom else? The civilized Earth races naturally have to stick together against the barbarians."

Duke stared at the almost comic figure, juggling the words he had heard with the obvious facts. "What Earth races? Do you mean that Earth is now giving citizenship to your people?"

"Not on this planet, of course." A pair of beady black eyes stared back, as if trying to understand a ridiculous question. "But we're citizens of Earth's economic-cultural-diplomatic system, naturally."

Duke felt something nibble at his mind, but he couldn't grasp it. And he wasn't accustomed to carrying on long chitchat with aliens. He shoved the thoughts away and reached for the paper again. "You won't find recruits here, Queeth. Only me. And I'm too old for the recruiting law. Besides, I've got to find a job."

He turned the pages, locating the column he wanted. What had Flannery meant about Republican Rome? Duke could remember dimly something about Rome's granting citizenship to her conquered neighbors. It had been the basis of the city's growth and later power. Now if Earth could inspire citizenship from conquered aliens—

Queeth made a sound like a sigh and shuffled his four feet on the sidewalk uncertainly. "If you came aboard on a visit, who could stop our taking off at once?" he suggested. "We have room for another officer, and we need men like you, Captain O'Neill, to help us against the aliens out there!"

Duke looked down at the small face, and even the alien features couldn't disguise the obvious sincerity behind the words. It should have made his decision automatic. He'd come here to be recruited, and he was being accepted. There was a ship waiting for him, where his skills could be used.

With such a ship, things would be different from the war he had known. He had a picture of Kloomiria under attack from it.

Abruptly, he was seeing again the exploding ships of Throm, and the charnel smell of Kordule on victorious Meloa was thick in his nose.

He stood up, shaking his head, and held out his hand, groping for the phrases that had been all-important once among the recruits he had joined. "Thanks, Queeth," he said finally. "But I've got something to catch up on here. Good luck—on to victory—and give the aliens hell!"

He stood watching Queeth patter off toward the waiting cab and saw it drive away. Then he turned to the want ads in earnest.

Nothing was clear in his mind yet, but he'd need a job first, then a room near the library. He had a lot of current history to catch up on. Whatever Earth was up to had to be recorded somewhere, if he could find it.

VIII

Through half his reign, Var of Kloomiria had nursed his hatred of the humans into a holy mission. It was eighty years since his visit to Cathay, when the colonists' children had run screaming from, him, shouting that he was a monster, but time had only sharpened the memory. He had covered his too-human body under a multitude of robes and had gloried in the alienness of his head, with its fringe of breathing tentacles and the two lobsterlike claws that concealed his tiny mouth. Year after long year, he had built and prayed for the war of vengeance that must come.

Almost, it had passed him by. With the threat of help from Earth for Cathay, he had been forced to delay while larger fleets were built. His reign had been drawing to a close and he had almost resigned himself to the law that would turn the rulership over to his eldest son. Then the boy had died in an explosion less than a week from the change of rule, and almost simultaneously Earth timidity had won again, and the protection had been denied her colony.

Now Var's waiting was finished. He stood in the cabin of his flagship, heading back to Kloomiria after the opening raid of the war, savoring the sweetness of the damage he had done Cathay. Life was sweet.

Behind him, the door dilated softly and his aide came in, carrying a roll of paper. "A message from Cathay, magnificence," he announced.

Var opened the message and studied it. Then he read it again, uncertainly. He was sure of his knowledge of English, but the note was senseless gibberish. Again he read it, this time aloud:

"Yours of the fourteenth ultimo received and contents noted. We are pleased to inform you that we are in a position to fill your entire order and that shipment is going out at once by special messenger. We trust that you will find our products superior in every way. We believe that you will find our terms completely reasonable."

It made no more sense aloud.

The aide sighed apologetically. "Deliberately misapplied archaicism is sometimes regarded as humorous by Earthmen, magnificence. I suspect this is a warning that they are retaliating."

"Bluff!" Var read the words again, but he could make no other meaning from them. Did the fools expect him to believe their flippancy spelled confidence, or were they deceiving themselves? And the hint of surrender terms was sheer stupidity. It must be an offer, though the wording seemed to indicate he should surrender!

He threw the message into the waste receptacle in disgust and went over to look at the screens where Kloomiria was showing. The humans of Cathay might try a return raid, but he was unworried. Cathay's fleet was pitiful, and she had no heavy ships from which to launch planet bombs. Of course, there were spy reports of vast numbers of what seemed to be guided missiles, but they could never get through the confusion-signals that blanketed Kloomiria.

As he watched, a signal blinked. He opened the circuit and the face of his admiral looked out. "We've received indications of a swarm of small ships, magnificence," the man reported. "High speed and piloted. It may be a suicide squadron."

"Suicide!" Var spat the word out. "Whoever heard of the human cowards risking their own necks?"

The aide touched his shoulder apologetically. "They are mentioned in Earth books, magnificence. And there was Djamboula."

Var stared at the screen as the flight was relayed to him, snarling. Definitely, they were one-man ships, not guided missiles. His defenses had never been built to handle suicide squadrons.

"Up, surround them, blast them!" he ordered. A few might get through to the ships or to the planet below, but quick action would wreak havoc among them and discourage further attempts.

The Kloomirian fleet opened into a circle and began rising. Now the swarm of little ships began breaking apart, fanning out and attempting to turn. Var hissed. Not even the courage to go through with it after they were discovered! They—

He leaped to the screen, cursing at what he saw.

Where the little ships had opened a hole, a monstrous bulk was hurtling through at fantastic speed. The tiny ships had screened it, but now it outran them, boring straight toward the opening in the Kloomirian fleet. Atomic cannon began running out of enormous hatches, like the bristles jutting from a tendril brush.

"Blast out!" Var screamed into his engine phone. His flagship leaped away at full drive, while the enemy seemed to grow on the screen. Then it diminished as they began drawing away from the fleet.

There was nothing Var could do about the horror that followed. The great vessel bored through the fleet with cannons spitting out hell. If countershots were fired, they had no effect.

"Sugfarth!" the aide screamed in his ears. "A ship from Sugfarth!"

Var remembered the pictures he had seen, and they matched, though none had suggested such a size. It was impossible. The race of Sugfarth were aliens—warriors who had fought humanoids as few races had done. They should have fought with him, not against him!

The ship drove down toward the planet, braking fiercely now. From it, two bulky objects fell. While the planet bombs dropped, the behemoth began to rise again. It came through the shattered ranks of Kloomiria's fleet, blasting again, and headed toward the tiny ships that had screened it, new hatches opening to receive them.

Half of Var's fleet was in total ruin. On the planet below, two horrible gouts of flame leaped up through the atmosphere and beyond it, while all of Kloomiria seemed to tremble as half a continent was ruined. Var stared down at the destruction, unmoving.

The aide coughed, holding out another roll of paper. "Cathay is broadcasting an appeal for us to surrender without reprisals, magnificence. And the Estate Governors are demanding fleet protection."

Var crushed the paper in his hands without reading it.

It would take half the remaining part of the fleet to give even token protection to Kloomiria. His plans had never been based on holding back the seemingly weak forces of Cathay.

"No answer," he said. His hand reached for the communicator switch and he began issuing orders. "The fleet will regroup and return to base for immediate repairs and rearming. Commanders of *all* ships will prepare to take off against Cathay within six hours!"

Somehow the humans had to be crushed completely before they could destroy Kloomiria. After that, if any of his race survived, there would be a mission for all future generations.

Only the power of Earth could have sent the alien ship from Sugfarth, loaded with cannon and bombs, to fight against fellow aliens. Earth had declared neutrality, and then struck! For such villainy, a million years was not too long to seek vengeance!

IX

Night had fallen in the park beyond the huge Foreign Office building and the air was damp and cool. Duke shivered in the shadows that covered his bench. He should head back to his room, but he had no desire to listen again to the meaningless chatter that came through the thin walls. Time didn't matter to him now, anyhow.

He swore and reached for a cigarette, brushing the crumpled newspaper from his lap. He'd been a fool to think Flannery would bother with him, just as he'd been a fool to turn down Queeth's offer. He'd wasted his day off from the messenger job.

Footsteps sounded down the walk that led past his bench, and he drew deeper into the shadows. The steps slowed and a man moved to the other end of the bench. Duke drew heavily on his cigarette, tossed it away, and started to get up.

"Drink?" There was a hand holding a flask in front of him. He hesitated, then took it, and let a long slug rum down his throat. In the faint light he could make out the face of Director Flannery. The man nodded. "Sorry I was out when you came, O'Neill. One of the guards saw you out here, so I came over."

"You should have been in," Duke said, handing the flask back. "I've changed my mind since reading about some of your deals in the *Journal*. Well, thanks for the drink."

One of Flannery's prosthetic hands rested on Duke's shoulder, and the pressure was surprisingly heavy. "When a man takes a drink with me, captain, he waits until I finish mine." He tipped up the flask and drank slowly before putting it away. "I suppose you mean the Cathay-Kloomiria mess?"

"What else?" Mess was a mild word. The Sugfarth ship had seemed to make victory for Cathay certain the first few days, but the war had entered a new phase now. Cathay couldn't maintain the big ship, and it was practically useless. It had simply served to reduce Kloomiria to a position where both sides were equal. The war showed signs of settling down to another prolonged, exhausting affair.

"Yeah, I read the editorial." Flannery sighed. "We did let a couple of fools make Cathay think we'd bail her out. At the time, it seemed wise.

The son of old Var was due to assume rule in a little while and he was strongly pro-human. We wanted to hold things off until he took over and scrapped the war plans. When he was killed—well, we pulled out before Var was any stronger."

"And sent Queeth's crowd in to do your blood-letting for you?" Duke sneered.

"That was their own idea," Flannery denied. He lighted a cigarette and sat staring at the end of it, blowing out a slow stream of smoke. "All right, we made a mess of Cathay. We'll know better next time. Care to walk back with me?"

"Why? So one of your trained psychopropagandists can indoctrinate me? Or to get drunk and cry over your confession?"

"To keep me from sinking to your level and pushing your nose down your throat!" Flannery told him, but there was no real anger in his voice. He stood up, shrugging. "Nobody's forcing you, O'Neill. Say the word and I'll drive you home. But if you want that explanation, my working office seems like a good place to talk."

For a moment, Duke wavered. But he'd reached the end of his own research, and he'd come here to find the answers. Leaving now would only make him more of a fool. "O.K.," he decided. "I'll stay for the big unveiling."

Flannery grimaced. "There's no great secret, though we don't broadcast the facts for people and races not ready for them. We figure those who finish growing up here will soak-up most of it automatically. Did you get around to the film file on interstellar wars at the library?"

Duke nodded, wondering how much they knew about his activities. He'd spent a lot of time going over the film for clues. It was so old that the color had faded in places. The rest would have been easier to take without color. Most wasn't good photography, but all was vivid. It was the record of all the wars since Earth's invention of the high-drive—nearly two hundred of them. Gimsul, Hathor, Ptek, Sugfarth, Clovis, and even Meloa—the part he hadn't seen, beyond Kordule where the real damage lay; Ronda had been wrong, and cannibalism had been discovered, along with much that was worse. Two hundred wars in which victor and vanquished alike had been ruined—in which the supreme effort needed to win had left most of the victors worse than the defeated systems.

"War!" The word was bitter on Flannery's lips. "Someone starts building war power—power to insure peace, as they always say. Then other systems must have power to protect themselves. Strength begets force—and fear and hatred. Sooner or later, the strain is too great, and you have a war so horrible that its very horror makes surrender impossible. You saw it on Meloa. I've seen it fifty times!"

They reached the Foreign Office building and began crossing its lobby. Flannery glanced up at the big seal on the wall with its motto in twisted Latin—*Per Astra ad Aspera*—and his eyes turned back to Duke's, but he made no comment. He led the way to a private elevator that dropped them a dozen levels below the street, to a small room, littered with things from every conceivable planet. One wall was covered with what seemed to be the control panel of a spaceship, apparently now used for a desk. The director dropped into a chair and motioned Duke to another.

He looked tired, and his voice seemed older as he bent to pull a small projector and screen from a drawer and set them up. "The latest chapter of the film," he said bitterly, throwing the switch.

It was a picture of the breakup of the Outer Federation, and in some ways worse than the other wars. Chumkt rebelled against Kel's leadership and joined the aliens, while a civil war sprang up on her surface. Two alien planets went over to Kel. The original war was forgotten in a struggle for new combinations, and a thousand smaller wars replaced it. The Federation was dead and the two dozen races were dying.

"When everything else fails, the fools try federation," Flannery said as the film ended. "We tried it on Earth. Another race discovered the interstellar drive before we did and used it to build an empire. We've found the dead and sterile remains of their civilization. It's always the same. When one group unites its power, those nearby must ally for protection. Then, there's a scramble for more power, while jealousies and fears breed new hatreds, internally and externally. And finally, there's ruin—because at the technological level of interstellar travel, victory in war is absolutely, totally impossible!"

He sat back, and Duke waited for him to resume, until it was obvious he had finished. At last, the younger man gave up waiting. "All right," he said. "Earth won't fight! Am I supposed to turn handsprings? I figured that much out myself. And I learned a long time ago about the blessed meek who were to inherit the Earth—but I can't remember anything being said about the stars!"

"You think peace won't work?" Flannery asked mildly.

"I know it won't!" Duke fumbled for a cigarette, trying to organize his thoughts. "You've been lucky so far. You've counted on the fact that war powers have to attack other powers nearby before they can safely strike against Earth, and you've buffered yourself with a jury-rigged economic trading system. But what happens when some really bright overlord decides to by-pass his local enemies? He'll drop fifty planet bombs out of your peaceful skies and collect your vassal worlds before they can rearm. You won't know about that, though. You'll be wiped out!"

"I wouldn't call our friends vassals, or say the system was jury-rigged," Flannery objected. "Ever hear of paradynamics? The papers call it the ability to manipulate relationships, when we let them write a speculative article. It's what lets us rebuild worlds in less than half a century—and form the first completely peaceful politico-economic culture we've ever known Besides, I never said we had no weapons for our defense."

Duke considered it, trying to keep a firm footing on the shifting quicksand of the other's arguments. He knew little of paradynamics, of course, but only as something supposed to remake the world and all science in some abstract future. It had been originated as a complex mathematical analysis of nuclear relationships, and had been seized on for some reason by the sociologists. It had no bearing he could see on the main argument.

"It won't wash, Flannery. Without a fleet, it won't matter if you have the plans of every weapon ever invented. The first time a smart power takes the chance, you'll run out of time."

"We didn't!" Flannery swung to the control board that served as his desk, and his fingers seemed to play idly with the dials. From somewhere below them, there was a heavy vibration, as if great engines had sprung into life. He pressed another switch.

Abruptly the room was gone. There was a night sky above them, almost starless, and with a great glaring moon shining down, to show a rough, mossy terrain that seemed covered endlessly with row after row of rusting, crumbling spaceships. Atomic cannon spilled from their hatches, and broken ramps led down to the ground. Down one clearer lane among the countless ships that surrounded him, Duke saw what might be a distant fire with a few bent figures around it, giving the impression of age.

Beside him, Flannery sat in his chair, holding a small control. There was nothing else of the office visible.

The director shook his head. "It's no illusion, O'Neill. You're here—fifty odd thousand light-years from Earth, where we transferred the attacking fleet. You never heard of that, of course. The dictator-ruler naturally didn't make a report when his fleet simply vanished without trace. Here!"

The liquor burned in Duke's throat, but it steadied him. He bent down, to feel the mossy turf under his hand.

"It's real," Flannery repeated. "Paradynamics handles all relationships, captain. And the position of a body is simply a statement of its geometrical relationships. What happens if we change those relationships—with power enough, that is? There is no motion, in any classic sense. But newspapers appear two high-drive days away minutes after they're printed. We arrive here. And fleets sent against Earth just aren't there any more!"

He pressed a button, and abruptly the walls of his office were around them again—the office that was suddenly the control room of a building that was more of a battleship than any Duke had ever seen.

He found himself clutching the chair, and forced himself to relax, soaking up the shock as he had soaked up so many others. His mind faced the facts, accepted them, and then sickly extended them.

"All right, you've got weapons," he admitted, and disgust was heavy in his voice. "You can defend yourself. But can the galaxy defend itself when somebody decides it's a fine offensive weapon? Or are all Earthmen supposed to be automatically pure, so this will never be turned to offensive use? Prove that to me and maybe I'll change my mind about this planet and take that job of yours!"

Flannery leaned back, nodding soberly. "I intend to," he answered. "Duke, we tried making peaceful citizens of our youngsters here a century ago, but it wouldn't work. Kids have to have their little gang wars and their fisticuffs to grow up naturally. We can't force them. Their interests aren't those of adults. In fact, they think adults are pretty dull. No adventure. They can't see that juggling a twenty-million gamble on tooling up for a new competitive product is exciting; they can't understand working in a dull laboratory to dig something new out of nature's files can be exciting and dangerous. Above all, they can't see that the greatest adventure is the job of bringing kids up to be other adults. They regret the passing of dueling and affairs of honor. But an adult civilization knows better—because the passing of such things is the first step toward a race becoming adult, because it is adopting a new type of thinking, where such things have no value. You didn't hit me when I called you names, because it made no sense from an adult point of view. Earth doesn't go to war for the same reason. Thank God, we grew up just before we got into space, where adult thinking is necessary to survival!"

There had been the kids and their seemingly pointless argument on the street. There had been the curiously distant respect the Meloans had shown him, as if they guessed that only his exterior was similar. There were a lot of things Duke could use to justify believing the director. It made a fine picture—as it was intended to.

"It must be wonderful to sit here safely, while agents do your dangerous work, feeling superior to anyone who shows any courage," he said bitterly. "I suppose every clerk and desk-jockey out there feeds himself the same type of rationalization. But words don't prove anything. How do you prove the difference between maturity and timidity or smugness?"

"You asked for it," Flannery said simply.

The button went down on the control again. The air was suddenly thin and bitingly cold as they looked down on a world torn with war, where a hundred ships shaped like half-disks and unlike anything Duke had seen were mixed up in some maneuver. The button was pushed again, and this time there was a world below that had a port busy with similar ships, not fighting now. A third press brought them onto the surface of a heavy world that seemed to be composed of solid buildings and factories, where the ships were being outfitted with incomprehensible goods. A thing like a pipe-stem man looked up from a series of operations, made a waving motion to them, and abruptly disappeared.

"Did you really think we could be the only adult race in the universe?" Flannery asked. "You're looking at the Allr, the closest cultural *Gestalt* to us, and somewhere near our level. Now—"

Something squamous perched on a rock on what seemed to be a barren world. Before it floated bright points of light that were obviously replicas of planets, with tiny lines of light between them, and a shuttling of glints along the lines. The thing seemed to look at them briefly. A tentacle whipped up and touched Flannery, who sat with his hands off the control box. Without its use, they were abruptly back in their office.

Flannery shivered, and there was strain on his face, while Duke felt his mind freeze slowly, as if with physical cold. The director cleaned his throat. "Or maybe we should look at more routine things, though you might consider that we have to get ready for the day when our advancing culture touches on other cultures. Because we can't put it off forever."

This time, they were in a building, like a crude shed, and there were men there, standing in front of a creature that seemed like a human in armor—but chitinous armor that was part of him. The alien suddenly turned, though Duke could now see that they were in a section behind one-way glass. Nevertheless, it seemed to sense them. Abruptly, something began pulling at his mind, as if his thoughts were being drained. Flannery hit the button again. "Telepathic race, and very immature," he said, and there was worry in his voice. "Thank God, the only one we've found, and out of our immediate line of advance."

There were other scenes. A human being who walked endlessly three feet off the floor, fighting against some barrier that wasn't there, with his face frozen in fear, while creatures that seemed to be metallic moved about. "He found something while working on one of our paradynamic problems," Flannery said. "He transported himself there and has been exactly like that ever since—three years, now. So far, our desk-jockeys here haven't been able to discover exactly what line he was working on, but they're trying!"

They were back in the office, and the director laid the control box on the big panel and cut off the power. He swung back to face Duke, his face tired.

"You'll find a ship waiting to take you to Throm, and a man on board who'll use the trip to brief you, if you decide to take the job. Duke. As I said, it's up to you. If you still prefer your wars, come and see me next week, and maybe I can get the recruiting law set aside in your case, since you're really a citizen of Meloa. Otherwise, the ship takes off for Throm in exactly three hours."

He led the way back to the elevator, and rode up to the lobby. Duke moved out woodenly, but Flannery was obviously going no farther. The old man handed over what was left of the flask, shook Duke's hand quickly, and closed the elevator door.

Duke downed the liquor slowly, without thinking. Finally, a flicker of thought seemed to stir in his frozen mind. He shook himself and headed down the lobby toward the Earth outside. A faint vibration seemed to quiver in the air from below, and he quickened his steps.

Outside, he shook himself again, signaled a cab, and climbed in.

"The first liquor store you come to," he told the driver. "And then take me to the government space port, no matter what I say!"

X

It was quiet in the underground office of the director, except for the faint sound of Flannery's arms sliding across each other in an unconscious massaging motion. He caught himself at it, and leaned back, his tired facial muscles twitching into a faint smile.

Strange things happened to a man when he grew old. His hair turned gray, he thought more of the past, and prosthetic limbs began to feel tired, as if the nerves were remembering also. And the work that had once seemed vitally important in every detail winnowed itself down to a few things, with the rest only bothersome routine.

He pulled a thermos of coffee from under the desk and turned back to the confusion of red-coded memoranda on his desk. Then the sound of the elevator coming down caught his attention, and he waited until the door opened.

"Hello, Harding," he said without turning around. Only one man beside himself had the key to the private entrance. "Coffee?"

Harding took a seat beside him, and accepted the plastic cup. "Thanks. I tried to call you, but your phone was shut off. Heard the good word?"

Flannery shook his head. With the matter of the strange ship that had been reported and the problem of what to do with the telepaths both coming to a head, he'd had no time for casual calls. There was no question now that the telepaths had plucked the knowledge of how to build an interstellar drive from the observers' minds, in spite of all precautions. And once they broke out into the rest of the galaxy—

"Var died of a heart attack in the middle of a battle," Harding announced. "And Cathay and Kloomiria sent each other surrender notices the minute word was official! The damnedest thing I ever heard of. Edmonds came with me, and he's upstairs now, planning a big victory celebration as soon as we can let the word out. It should finish his reorientation."

"I'll probably get word on it by the time someone has it all organized into a nice, official memo," Flannery said. "Back him up on that celebration. It's worth a celebration to find out both worlds are that close to maturity. Coming over for bridge tonight?"

Harding shook his head. "I'll be up to my elbows in bills for the relief of Cathay and Kloomiria. It's a mess, even if it could be worse. Maybe tomorrow."

He dropped the cup onto the desk and turned to the elevator, while Flannery hunted through the memoranda. As he expected, he found a recent one announcing Var's death. He rubbed his arms together as he read it, but there was no new information in it.

Then, reluctantly, he picked up his phone and started to call. Scanning for information, just as another bundle of memos came through a small door in the panel. At the sight of the top photo, he put the phone back on its cradle. His face tautened and his arms lay limp as he read through it.

The picture was that of one of the half-disk Allr ships. The rumors of the strange ship were true enough. One of the Allr races had crossed the gulf between the two expanding cultures, and had touched several worlds briefly, to land in the biggest city on Ptek, the trading center for a whole sector. It had been there two days already, before being reported to Earth!

To make matters worse, it had come because its home world had been visited by a foreign ship—from the description, apparently from Sugfarth; there was no longer any chance of cutting off the news, since it would be circulating busily through both cultures. And with it must be going a thousand wild schemes by trading adventurers for exploration!

He'd expected it to happen some day, maybe in fifty years, after he was out of the office. By then enough of the worlds should have reached maturity to offer some hope of peaceful interpenetration. But now—

Victory, he thought bitterly. A small victory, and then this. Or maybe two small victories, if O'Neill worked out as well on Throm as he seemed to be doing, and if he realized he'd never be satisfied until he could return to Earth to face the problems he now knew existed. Flannery had almost hoped that it would be O'Neill who would handle the problem of cultural interpenetration. The man had ability.

But all that was in the past now, along with all the other victories. And in the present, as always, there were larger and larger problems, while full maturity lay forever a little farther on.

Then he smiled slowly at himself. There were problems behind him, too—ones whose solutions made these problems possible. And there would always be victory enough.

What was victory, after all, but the chance to face bigger and bigger problems without fear?

Flannery picked up the phone, and his arms were no longer tired.

A Pound of Cure

Maryl sat in the same spot as he'd left her in the morning, and the house was a mess, except for the big electrochord Henry had bought for Jimmy's first lessons. That was polished to a gleam of synthetic mahogany, and topped by the tri-di picture of the boy, taken a year ago. Now she sat with her hands in her lap, facing it. Wrapped around one finger was the yellow curl she'd saved from the boy's first haircut, and her thumb was caressing it softly.

But she got up as Henry came in, her face hardening. He flinched, dropping his eyes, and reaching for the slippers the robot houseboy should have brought. Then he remembered why the little robot was no longer around, and jerked his eyes up guiltily to meet hers.

"Henry!" Her voice had a touch of a quiver to it, but it carried determination. "Henry! I've made up my mind. Jimmy's been with your mother two days now, and it isn't good for him to be away from me so long. I want you to drive out for him tonight!"

He'd been afraid of it, and his story was ready. But looking at her, he dropped it. "I had a hard day, honey. I'm dead. Besides, the heli's acting up. I don't think it would take three hundred miles there and back."

Her lips grew thin. "I work, too, Henry. I spent all day cleaning Jimmy's room." Her face lightened, and a fond smile tugged at the corner of her mouth. "He's such a messy boy. But he is a sweet child, too. I've been thinking we should let him grow his curls again, Henry. He looked so nice that way."

Henry forced the anger out of his voice, trying to remember that it had been harder on her. They hadn't meant to let her know about the hysterectomy and the fact that she couldn't have other children; she'd always been sensitive, and her whole life had been centered on having the maximum five children the law allowed. But somehow she'd learned the truth. And since then she'd changed. Like letting the house go to pot, not even ordering the robot maid to make the beds, or letting it do more than a token cleaning; like cleaning Jimmy's room daily by herself.

He nodded. "I've been thinking so too, Maryl. In fact, Mother told me I should. Said we were trying to make Jimmy into a man too fast. Told me she was taking him out to buy him a blue velvet suit tonight."

He watched the reaction, and some relief came as Maryl softened. "That's nice. Though she might talk to me about it. Still—umm, maybe you can get Jimmy tomorrow. I guess she's lonely, too. But you've got to bring him back tomorrow, Henry. Tomorrow!"

"Tomorrow," he promised, and clumped out to the kitchen to see what Zenia, the maid, had prepared for his supper. Maryl had unquestionably eaten at five, since she'd started sharing her dinner with Jimmy, instead of waiting for him. Sometimes now it seemed to him that he was more married to the robot than to his wife. She'd been named for a real maid they'd had seven years before, and her body had been fixed to look like the girl's, even to the tiny sweat glands that left beads of moisture on her forehead when she worked over the stove.

He told her the new one he'd heard at the office, about the heli salesgirl who'd married the lion tamer. It couldn't have meant anything to her, but she laughed at the right place, and countered with the story of a widower in France looking for mourning clothes. He went up to bed feeling considerably better.

Sometime during the night he awakened to realize Maryl wasn't in her bed. He tiptoed down the hall, to find her curled up on Jimmy's bed, sound asleep. But the light must have disturbed her. She turned part-way over, and muttered something. He bent down. "My own little Jimmy boy," she was saying. Henry closed the door and went back to bed, frowning. If she'd only have consented to adopt other children, instead of flying off the handle at the idea of wasting her time on other women's children!

Dr. Broderick had better make good on his promise, Henry thought. If Maryl ever suspected that her son was staying with his grandmother because he'd broken both legs falling out of a tree in the park…Well, she couldn't find that out. Nor could she be held off any longer. Each day without Jimmy seemed to make things worse.

But Dr. Broderick was smiling the next morning. He should have been smiling, Henry thought, with what they were paying for his personal advice and special services. Still, Maryl's father had left enough to his son-in-law, and anything was better than seeing her again without bringing her son back to her.

"It's ready," he said. He was a big man, with an annoying keenness that seemed to cut through into a man's personal thoughts, and a reputation as the best family adjustment expert in America.

He stopped to unwrap two cigars and pass one to Henry. "I was out to see Jimmy last night, Henry," he said. "A fine boy—with the right upbringing, the kind of future citizen we need desperately after the load of neurotics our ancestors wished off on us. And you're good for him, even if you do have your own twists. But even with my advice, you can't handle him alone. I caught a trace of a petulant whine in his voice twice last night. Now, did you talk to Maryl about adopting a sister for him? He's six, you know—time to begin."

Henry avoided his glance. "I talked to her, day before yesterday. But she thinks…"

"Yeah. I was afraid so. Resents the idea of anyone coming between her and the boy. I'm afraid I made a mistake in passing her for marriage, though she was all right until we had to remove that tumor. Good blood, but her mother... And as the daughter of a man who won the Personal Privilege rating, we can't send her to a home for memory removal without her consent. Unless you were to request it, of course…"

Henry shrugged. They'd been through that before.

Broderick got up, shaking his head. "Laws, laws, laws. How can we save the kids when we have to work with the laws their psychotic grandfathers passed?"

"You might worry more about your other patients—they're still paying you, even if they have grown up," Henry pointed out.

"True. I do worry about them. But what difference does it make if they're happy in a dream world? It's too late to give them the right help. But it's not too late to save the kids. And once we can get one generation where a sound adjustment is the norm, we won't have to worry after that." He stood up abruptly, and moved to a side door. "Okay, forget it. Here's what you came for."

The door opened and a boy came walking in, smiling quickly as he saw Henry. "Father!" he cried out, and broke into a run. Henry reacted automatically for a second, before he remembered that it was all a fake. Under the curly yellow hair and eager young face, there was still the mind of the robot houseboy.

Broderick's voice cut into the scene before it could become too awkward. "All right, Jimmy, you'd better wait outside. Your father will be out in a minute." He watched the boylike figure leave, and turned to Henry. "We were lucky in having one of the small robots working where he could remember so much about Jimmy. It made the substitution easy, and I hope it will prevent any slip-ups. Now, though, it's up to you. Still think you can treat him like the real Jimmy?"

"I think so," Henry said.

"You'd better. After all, it was your idea. We've considered things like this before, but we've been uncertain about the results. If Maryl guesses…well, she'll really crack then, probably. If it works, though, you may have started something that will save a lot of misery in the world." The psychiatrist picked up his type-pen, nodded, and dismissed Henry. "Let me know the minute anything goes wrong. And good luck!"

Jimmy was waiting outside, and they filed up toward the heli ramp together. The boy was quiet at first, as he might have been after any strange experience. Then he gradually began to chatter about his grandmother, and Henry found himself making the proper responses. It wasn't going to be so hard, after all—if Maryl would accept the substitution. He glanced at the boy. Outwardly he seemed perfect. No, not quite. He seemed a bit younger than he was, and his hair was longer. But maybe that was what Broderick had decided was closest to Maryl's memory. They stopped on the way to get the blue-velvet suit. It took six stores before one was able to fabricate the right kind of cloth, but there was time to kill, since he was supposedly bringing the boy back from a longish trip. Henry still had time to make the office when he led the facsimile boy up the steps.

Maryl came down the stairs at a run, and the boy flew into her arms. There was a small feast of goodies spread out on the dining-room table, Henry saw—and Maryl began shouting to Zenia to bring more. Her face was glowing, and she didn't even look at her husband.

He squirmed uncomfortably, while the boy began repeating his chatter about his grandmother. Maryl glanced up finally and saw her husband for the first time. "Jimmy's home!" she said. "Isn't it wonderful? And you'll be late to work, Henry." She kissed him quickly on the cheek and dashed back as Jimmy began opening presents.

Henry went back to the heli, frowning. It wouldn't matter with the robot. But still…Maybe Broderick was right. Maybe he'd better insist on registering the boy for school, so things would be on a sounder footing when the real Jimmy returned. Still, that would require having a tutor for Jimmy while he recovered. He'd wait and see. By the time he returned, however, things were back to something approaching normal. He got part of the day's events out of Zenia, before Maryl came out to the kitchen. She twitted him about having an affair with their maid, almost as if the old days were back. But she stayed only a minute before going up to the nursery. That was in keeping with her present pattern, however. And it wouldn't hurt, probably, since the robot-boy would be feigning sleep.

Curiously, Maryl seemed happier than before as the days passed. She began going out into the garden, according to Zenia, to play with Jimmy. And she even permitted the boy to stay on the swing and get dirty in the sandpile. Henry tried to tell himself that the shock of her lost ability to have other children was wearing off.

He took one day off to fly up and see the real Jimmy, but there were no worries on that score. The legs were healing, and the boy was happy enough to see him. He called Maryl with the old excuse of a business trip, and stayed over for the night. Damn it, Jimmy was a fine boy, as Broderick admitted, and a man had some rights with his own son.

Maryl met him when he came back, and he knew at once I that something had gone wrong. The sparkle was gone, and she was too warm in her greeting. Also, supper for the two of them was laid out on the dining-room table. She sat down, but made no effort to touch the food.

"Where's Jimmy?" she asked. "And what happened to our houseboy?"

He'd been prepared for deviousness of some kind, but this caught him off guard. For a second, he fumbled in his mind, trying to hold his facial muscles firmly.

"Don't lie to me!" she snapped. "You lied to me once, when I went to the hospital. I haven't forgotten that. And I didn't think you'd dare try it again. Henry Needham, what have you done with my boy?"

He let his muscles sag then. "You mean—you mean Jimmy's run away? Maryl, you're nuts. I sold the houseboy two weeks ago when he began to mistake orders. Jimmy couldn't have run off with him."

"Jimmy's upstairs," she said slowly. She frowned, then shook her head. "I thought…Maybe I'm just worried about school, and everything…"

"We could skip another year of school," he suggested quickly. She nodded, and turned quickly toward the stairs, smiling again. But there was still an odd expression on her face.

The suspicious looks continued for the next two days. But on the third, she was as radiant as she had ever been. Henry could get nothing out of Zenia. He suspected somehow that the maid had let something slip, but if so, the results had worn off

The crisis seemed to have passed, in any event, without the need of Broderick's advice. Another week slipped by, and twice Maryl ate with him. The house was better regulated. She still slept part of the time with Jimmy, but some mornings he woke to find her in the opposite bed. Time, he thought—time, and no new worries. In spite of Broderick's fine theories, Maryl was sound material. She'd be herself again, yet.

It was just a week before the real Jimmy was to return that he awoke to find her sitting up, studying him. He roused himself, trying to reach a stage of alertness, but she smiled and pushed him back.

"I'm just being fond of you, Henry," she said, and there was new warmth in her laugh. "You're the clever Henry I always knew you were. Who else would have thought of getting me a robot Jimmy to substitute for my boy while he was sick? Oh, don't deny it—I called up one of the women friends of your mother—one I met two years ago. And I'm not mad, not at all. I think it was very sweet of you to bring me the new Jimmy. Without him, I couldn't have stood it."

"Maryl!" He caught her suddenly, studying her face. But there were no secrets in it. She'd found out, somehow—but she'd taken it. Broderick be damned! Maryl was all right again. She was too smart to be fooled, but it didn't matter now. "Maryl, to hell with my work. Let's pack up and go out to Mother's until the boy's ready to come back. Let's make it a celebration. Let's…"

She grinned, but shook her head. "And you with the new fusion jet about to be put through its trials? Don't be silly, Henry. I can wait, now!"

She proved that she could, too. Henry watched her while the week dragged along. The success of the jet meant nothing compared to the new—or rather, old—Maryl. Then he got the final returns on it, and knocked off. He put through a couple of calls, chuckling to himself. Psychiatrists! A good husband was worth a dozen of them. If a man couldn't figure what was good for his own wife, who could? And this would be the best thing of all.

A surprise party was just the thing. She was expecting Jimmy back in two more days, but the boy was well. And happiness never hurt anyone. He wound up his affairs, climbed into his heli, and took off for his mother's place, chuckling at the picture of Maryl's face when he walked through the door with Jimmy that night.

It came off on schedule—at least through the door. He'd warned the boy about the substitute, and about the surprise. And that part went off well, too. Jimmy considered his robot twin a fine joke as they stood there, watching Maryl and the robot coming down the stairs to the door.

Then she stopped. Her eyes darted from one to the other. She hesitated a second longer. Then she swung about, picking the robot up hastily and heading him back up the stairs, with a quick word in his ear.

"It's all right, Maryl," Henry began. "Jimmy knows ..."

"Jimmy doesn't. He's too young for that—too innocent!" She came across the hall now, her back straight and her lips drawn straighter. She went past Henry, and up to her son.

One hand came back and forward, and her palm caught the boy behind the ear, sending him staggering. "You!" Her voice rose to a scream of rage. "You—trying to come in here! Get out. Get out, do you hear! You filthy little monster! Do you think I don't know what you'll do? Do you think you can come here and steal the place of my own little Jimmy?"

Her arm came up again, but Henry got between them somehow. "Maryl—this is Jimmy. See how he's grown! A whole inch. And Mother's been teaching him to read! Look, let him show you!"

She was across the room, shouting for Zenia. "Throw them out! Zenia, throw them out! They can't do it!"

Henry stood rooted to the floor as the maid came forward, keyed to obey Maryl before anyone else. He shot one uncomprehending look at his wife and another at the stricken face of the real Jimmy. Then the sickness in him was swallowed up by the younger misery beside him.

"It's all right, Jim," he said quietly. "It's all right. Your mother's sick—I didn't want to tell you, because I thought she'd be better. We'll go and get Dr. Broderick, and then everything will be all right."

He retreated through the door, leading the boy. "She's delirious, Jim—you know what that means—like the time your friend Phil had the fever. But she'll be all right, later. Come on, I'll let you fly the heli while we find a phone and get Dr. Broderick."

This time, Broderick made no comments. His eyes slitted once on the visiphone, and then he nodded. "Leave the boy in the heli, Henry," he ordered. "And for God's sake, don't forget to take the key out with you. I'll meet you in front of your house."

Reaction had set in by the time Broderick arrived. Henry had only a vague idea of what went on as they were let into the house by Zenia. Broderick headed up the stairs toward the nursery, motioning Henry to wait. He dropped onto a chair, sitting on the edge, and took the drink that Zenia brought. As the door to the nursery opened, there was the sound of sobbing, and then it closed, leaving only silence. The third drink was finished when Broderick came back, and his face was taut and worn. Henry stumbled toward him. "Is it…?"

"The worst that could happen—or the best. I don't know. I should have you confined to a cage in the zoo with the other apes, Henry. Damn it, I told you to let me know at the first sign. Oh, drat it, I know it's my own fault. I should know better than to trust a man who'd marry a neurotic woman and then stick with her. Go up and see her, but don't say anything. Just look in the door and come out again."

Henry crept up silently. There were no sounds of sobbing now, only a crooning blur of words. He opened the door a crack, forgetting Broderick's advice as he tried to phrase something comforting. But she didn't look around. Her face was close to that of the robot Jimmy, and she was crooning to it.

"No they're not. Not to my little robot. My own little baby boy. I won't let them. Dr. Broderick understands. He won't let that mean old man do anything. And you'll always be mine. Always. You'll never grow old, and you'll never be mean to me. No other woman will ever have you, 'cause you won't grow up and go away from me. You'll always be just the way you are. My own little boy, my sweet little robot boy who's all mine! Won't you, Jimmy boy?"

"All yours, Mama," the robot answered, and a small hand came out to rest on her hair caressingly. "Just like I am."

She gurgled happily. "All right. And what's a robot, angel?"

"A robot's the nicest kind of special boy, Mama," the creature answered, gurgling back. "And it's me, 'cause I love you."

"And what's a Mama?" she asked.

Henry shut the door softly, cutting off the words, while the voices went on and on until Broderick came up to lead him down and into the kitchen for another drink. "There's still Jimmy," the psychiatrist reminded him. "Suicide won't solve that, Henry!"

He hadn't realized he was thinking it, though the man was right. "Jimmy." He rolled it off his tongue. "You can erase the memory of this from him, can't you?"

Broderick nodded. "We'll do that, of course. We'll do everything we can to make sure our future citizens don't inherit the sins of their fathers. But can you forget, Henry? If there's one chance in a hundred of returning Maryl, can you take it and forget what has happened? Can you build a whole new life for yourself?"

Henry's eyes rested on Broderick. Therapy, he thought. Therapy—stall the patient with any promises until he can be given full treatment.

Broderick shook his head this time, again seeming to read Henry's mind. "It'll cost every cent you have, Henry. You'll have to move to a new town where nobody knows you, get yourself a new apartment and a new job—a job, not a position until you can earn one. And no robots. Absolutely nothing from this life. There are new techniques, but they're risky and imperfect. All psychiatry is imperfect. You may find differences."

"For Maryl—" Henry began slowly.

Broderick cut him off. "No, for Jimmy. Because all I can promise is that we won't permit anything which will ruin his future. We want you and Maryl to be happy, but we don't demand it. And if anything goes wrong, you'll be the one to suffer for it. Well?"

"When?" he asked.

"Whenever you're ready, Henry. We'll have finished what we can do before you can find your job and set yourself up with reasonable conveniences."

He thought it over, looking for the trick. Maybe, if they made it hard enough for him, they could force him to take some job which would prove a blind alley, where he could never earn enough to support a wife and son. They could put Maryl away with her robot and bring Jimmy up with their cold and logical scientific ideas. Once they got him away, he could never fall back on Personal Privilege laws. And his therapy would be the slow adjustment of a man in a routine job, looking forward with dimming hopes to a future that always was one step away.

He'd been muttering to himself, but Broderick must have heard some of it. The psychiatrist grimaced. "No, Henry. You'll have some money left—enough to set yourself up. And you're too good an accountant to pigeonhole in any small job, even if you are rusty. There's an opening for you, wherever you go."

There had to be some catch, or they'd have tried it long ago. And yet it sounded like more than humoring him. He considered it, but he already knew his decision. "There's a plane leaving in an hour for Seattle," he remembered aloud.

Broderick lifted the receiver and began dialing for a heli-cab. "Sooner than you think, Henry," he promised.

He kept his promise. It was less than two weeks later that Henry stood at the airport in Seattle, watching a boy of six and a hesitatingly smiling Maryl get off the plane and head toward him.

But it was four years before he found the catch, and then only by accident, or one of the lapses of memory only psychiatrists could explain. He was finishing up a late evening at the office, winding up an involved new contract with a New York firm. He was impatient to get home, and trying to make up his mind whether to take flowers to his wife or a new gadget to his son. And his fingers dialed the New York number automatically, before he realized it was the number of his own former home.

For a second, he started to hang up. Then curiosity got the better of him, and he hesitated while an image sprang onto the screen.

There was a face in the foreground, but his attention snapped to the couch behind—first in recognition, then in shocked disbelief. There, a six-year old boy who looked exactly like his memory of Jimmy was playing cat's-cradle with a Maryl whose face was radiant with pleasure. An older Maryl, a faintly time-eroded copy of the wife who waited for him at home…

"Good evening. Mrs. Needham's residence," the voice of the robot maid insisted again.

Henry wordlessly studied the face on the screen. It was not the face of Zenia—definitely not Zenia.

"Sorry," he said haltingly. "Wrong number."

He sat for long minutes after he'd hung up, staring at the blank screen. The phone buzzed once. It was probably the New York lawyers calling him. But he let it ring, without answering.

And finally he nodded. He'd get both the gadgets and the flowers.

When a man had such a fine future citizen for a son—and the only completely loyal and understanding wife in the world—he could afford to splurge a little.

The Day Is Done
[Day Is Done]

Hwoogh scratched the hair on his stomach and watched the sun climb up over the hill. He beat listlessly on his chest and yelled at it timidly, then grumbled and stopped. In his youth, he had roared and stumped around to help the god up, but now it wasn't worth the effort. Nothing was. He found a fine flake of sweaty salt under his hair, licked it off his fingers, and twisted over to sleep again.

But sleep wouldn't come. On the other side of the hill there was a hue and cry, and somebody was beating a drum in a throbbing chant. The old Neanderthaler grunted and held his hands over his ears, but the Sun-Warmer's chant couldn't be silenced. More ideas of the Talkers.

In his day, it had been a lovely world, full of hairy grumbling people; people a man could understand. There had been game on all sides, and the caves about had been filled with the smoke of cooking fires. He had played with the few young that were born—though each year fewer children had come into the tribe—and had grown to young manhood with the pride of achievement. But that was before the Talkers had made this valley one of their hunting grounds.

Old traditions, half-told, half-understood, spoke of the land in the days of old, when only his people roamed over the broad tundra. They had filled the caves and gone out in packs too large for any animals to withstand. And the animals swarmed into the land, driven south by the Fourth Glaciation. Then the great cold had come again, and times had been hard. Many of his people had died.

But many had lived, and with the coming of the warmer, drier climate, again, they had begun to expand before the Talkers arrived. After that—Hwoogh stirred uneasily—for no good reason he could see, the Talkers took more and more of the land, and his people retreated and diminished before them. Hwoogh's father had made it understood that their little band in the valley was all that was left, and that this was the only place on the great flat earth where Talkers seldom came.

Hwoogh had been twenty when he first saw them, great long-legged men, swift of foot and eye, stalking along as if they owned the earth, with their incessant mouth noises. In the summer that year, they pitched their skin-and-wattle tents at the back of the hill, away from the caves, and made magic to their gods. There was magic on their weapons, and the beasts fell their prey. Hwoogh's people had settled back, watching fearfully, hating numbly, finally resorting to begging and stealing. Once a young buck had killed the child of a Talker, and been flayed and sent out to die for it. Thereafter, there had been a truce between Cro-Magnon and Neanderthaler.

Now the last of Hwoogh's people were gone, save only himself, leaving no children. Seven years it had been since Hwoogh's brother had curled up in the cave and sent his breath forth on the long journey to his ancestors. He had always been dispirited and weak of will, but he had been the only friend left to Hwoogh.

The old man tossed about and wished that Keyoda would return. Maybe she would bring food from the Talkers. There was no use hunting now, when the Talkers had already been up and killed all the easy game. Better that a man should sleep all the time, for sleep was the only satisfying thing left in the topsy-turvy world; even the drink the tall Cro-Magnons made from mashed roots left a headache the next day.

He twisted and turned in his bed of leaves at the edge of the cave, grunting surlily. A fly buzzed over his head provocatively, and he lunged at it. Surprise lighted his features as his fingers closed on the insect, and he swallowed it with a momentary flash of pleasure. It wasn't as good as the grubs in the forest, but it made a tasty appetizer.

The sleep god had left, and no amount of lying still and snoring would lure him back. Hwoogh gave up and squatted down on his haunches. He had been meaning to make a new head for his crude spear for weeks, and he rummaged around in the cave for materials. But the idea grew further away the closer he approached the work, and he let his eyes roam idly over the little creek below him and the fleecy clouds in the sky. It was a warm spring, and the sun made idleness pleasant.

The sun god was growing stronger again, chasing the cold fog and mist away. For years, he had worshiped the sun god as his, and now it seemed to grow strong again only for the Talkers. While the god was weak, Hwoogh's people had been mighty; now that its long sickness was over, the Cro-Magnons spread out over the country like the fleas on his belly.

Hwoogh could not understand it. Perhaps the god was mad at him, since gods are utterly unpredictable. He grunted, wishing again for his brother who had understood such things better.

Keyoda crept around the boulder in front of the cave, interrupting his brooding. She brought scraps of food from the tent village and the half-chewed leg of a horse, which Hwoogh seized on and ripped at with his strong teeth. Evidently the Talkers had made a big kill the day before, for they were lavish with their gifts. He grunted at Keyoda, who sat under the cave entrance in the sun, rubbing her back.

Keyoda was as hideous as most of the Talkers were to Hwoogh, with her long dangling legs and short arms, and the ungainly straightness of her carriage. Hwoogh remembered the young girls of his own day with a sigh; they had been beautiful, short and squat, with forward-jutting necks and nice low foreheads. How the flat-faced Cro-Magnon women could get mates had been a puzzle to Hwoogh, but they seemed to succeed.

Keyoda had failed, however, and in her he felt justified in his judgment. There were times when he felt almost in sympathy with her, and in his own way he was fond of her. As a child, she had been injured, her back useless for the work of a mate. Kicked around by the others of her tribe, she had gradually drifted away from them, and when she stumbled on Hwoogh, his hospitality had been welcome to her. The Talkers were nomads who followed the herds north in the summer, south in the winter, coming and going with the seasons, but Keyoda stayed with Hwoogh in his cave and did the few desultory tasks that were necessary. Even such a half-man as the Neanderthaler was preferable to the scornful pity of her own people, and Hwoogh was not unkind.

"*Hrunkh?*" asked Hwoogh. With his stomach partly filled, he felt more kindly toward the world.

"Oh, they come out and let me pick up their scraps—me, who was once a chief's daughter!—same as they always do." Her voice had been shrewish, but the weariness of failure and age had taken the edge from it. " 'Poor, poor Keyoda,' thinks they, 'let her have what she wants, just so it don't mean nothin' we like.' Here." She handed him a roughly made spear, flaked on both sides of the point, but with only a rudimentary barb, unevenly made. "One of 'em give me this—it ain't the like of what they'd use, I guess, but it's good as you could make. One of the kids is practicing."

Hwoogh examined it; good, he admitted, very good, and the point was fixed nicely in the shaft. Even the boys, with their long limber thumbs that could twist any which way, made better weapons than he; yet once, he had been famous among his small tribe for the nicety of his flint work.

Making the sign of horses, he got slowly to his feet. The shape of his jaw and the attachment of his tongue, together with the poorly developed left frontal lobe of his brain, made speech rudimentary, and he supplemented his glottals and labials with motions that Keyoda understood well enough. She shrugged and waved him out, gnawing on one of the bones.

* * *

Hwoogh wandered about without much spirit, conscious that he was growing old. And vaguely, he knew that age should not have fallen upon him for many snows; it was not the number of seasons, but something else, something that he could feel but not understand. He struck out for the hunting fields, hoping that he might find some game for himself that would require little effort to kill. The scornful gifts of the Talkers had become bitter in his mouth.

But the sun god climbed up to the top of the blue cave without Hwoogh's stumbling on anything. He swung about to return, and ran into a party of Cro-Magnons returning with the carcass of a reindeer strapped to a pole on their shoulders. They stopped to yell at him.

"No use, Hairy One!" they boasted, their voices light and gay. "We caught all the game this way. Turn back to your cave and sleep."

Hwoogh dropped his shoulders and veered away, his spear dragging limply on the ground. One of the party trotted over to him lightly. Sometimes Legoda, the tribal magic man and artist, seemed almost friendly, and this was one of the times.

"It was my kill, Hairy One," he said tolerantly. "Last night I drew strong reindeer magic, and the beast fell with my first throw. Come to my tent and I'll save a leg for you. Keyoda taught me a new song that she got from her father, and I would repay her."

Legs, ribs, bones! Hwoogh was tired of the outer meat. His body demanded the finer food of the entrails and liver. Already his skin was itching with a rash, and he felt that he must have the succulent inner parts to make him well; always before, that had cured him. He grunted, between appreciation and annoyance, and turned off. Legoda pulled him back.

"Nay, stay, Hairy One. Sometimes you bring good fortune to me, as when I found the bright ocher for my drawing. There is enough in the camp for all. Why hunt today?" As Hwoogh still hesitated, he grew more insistent, not from kindness, but more from a wish to have his own way. "The wolves are running near today, and one is not enough against them. We carve the reindeer at the camp as soon as it comes from the pole. I'll give you first choice of the meat!"

Hwoogh grunted a surly acquiescence and waddled after the party. The dole of the Talkers had become gall to him, but liver was liver—if Legoda kept his bargain. They were chanting a rough marching song, trotting easily under the load of the reindeer, and he lumbered along behind, breathing hard at the pace they set.

As they neared the village of the nomads, its rough skin tents and burning fires threw out a pungent odor that irritated Hwoogh's nostrils. The smell of the long-limbed Cro-Magnons was bad enough without the dirty smell of a camp and the stink of their dung-fed fires. He preferred the accustomed moldy stench of his own musty cave.

Youths came swarming out at them, yelling with disgust at being left behind on this easy hunt. Catching sight of the Neanderthaler, they set up a howl of glee and charged at him, throwing sticks and rocks and jumping at him with play fury. Hwoogh shivered and crouched over, menacing them with his spear, and giving voice to throaty growls. Legoda laughed.

"In truth, O Hairy Chokanga, your voice should drive them from you. But see, they fear it not. Kuch, you two-legged pests! Out and away! Kuch, I say!" They leaped back at his voice and dropped behind, still yelling. Hwoogh eyed them warily, but so long as it suited the pleasure of Legoda, he was safe from their ranks.

Legoda was in a good mood, laughing and joking, tossing his quips at the women until his young wife came out and silenced it. She sprang at the reindeer with her flint knife, and the other women joined her. "Heya," called Legoda. "First choice goes to Chokanga, the Hairy One. By my word, it is his."

"O fool!" There was scorn in her voice and in the look she gave Hwoogh. "Since when do we feed the beasts of the caves and the fish of the river? Art mad, Legoda. Let him hunt for himself."

Legoda tweaked her back with the point of his spear, grinning. "Aye, I knew thou'dst cry at that. But then, we owe his kind some pay—this was his hunting ground when we were but pups, straggling into this far land. What harm to give to an old man?" He swung to Hwoogh and gestured. "See, Chokanga, my word is good. Take what you want, but see that it is not more than your belly and that of Keyoda can hold this night." Hwoogh darted in and came out with the liver and the fine sweet fat from the entrails. With a shrill cry of rage, Legoda's mate sprang for him, but the magic man pushed her back.

"Nay, he did right! Only a fool would choose the haunch when the heart of the meat was at hand. By the gods of my father, and I expected to eat of that myself! O Hairy One, you steal the meat from my mouth, and I like you for it. Go, before Heya gets free."

Tomorrow, Hwoogh knew, Legoda might set the brats on him for this day's act, but tomorrow was in another cave of the sun. He drew his legs under him and scuttled off to the left and around the hill, while the shrill yells of Heya and the lazy good humor of Legoda followed. A piece of liver dangled loose, and Hwoogh sucked on it as he went. Keyoda would be pleased, since she usually had to do the begging for both of them.

And a little of Hwoogh's self-respect returned. Hadn't he outsmarted Legoda and escaped with the choicest meat? And had Keyoda ever done as well when she went to the village of the Talkers? *Ayeee*, they had a thing yet to learn from the cunning brain of old Hwoogh!

Of course the Talkers were crazy; only fools would act as Legoda had done. But that was none of his business. He patted the liver and fat fondly and grinned with a slight return of good humor. Hwoogh was not one to look a gift horse in the mouth.

The fire had shrunk to a red bed of coals when he reached the cave, and Keyoda was curled up on his bed, snoring loudly, her face flushed. Hwoogh smelled her breath, and his suspicions were confirmed. Somehow, she had drunk of the devil brew of the Talkers, and her sleep was dulled with its stupor. He prodded her with his toe, and she sat up bleary-eyed.

"Oh, so you're back. *Ayeee*, and with liver and fat! But that never came from your spear throw; you been to the village and stole it. Oh, but you'll catch it!" She grabbed at the meat greedily and stirred up the fire, spitting the liver over it.

Hwoogh explained as best he could, and she got the drift of it. "So? Eh, that Legoda, what a prankster he is, and my own nephew, too." She tore the liver away, half-raw, and they fell to eagerly, while she chuckled and cursed by turns. Hwoogh touched her nose and wrinkled his face up.

"Well, so what if I did?" Liquor had sharpened her tongue. "That no-good son of the chief come here, after me to be telling him stories. And to make my old tongue free, he brings me the root brew. Ah, what stories I'm telling—and some of them true, too!" She gestured toward a crude pot. "I reckon he steals it, but what's that to us? Help yourself, Hairy One. It ain't ever' day we're getting the brew."

Hwoogh remembered the headaches of former experiments, but he smelled it curiously, and the lure of the magic water caught at him. It was the very essence of youth, the fire that brought life to his legs and memories to his mind. He held it up to his mouth, gasping as the beery liquid ran down his throat. Keyoda caught it before he could finish and drained the last quart.

"Ah, it strengthens my back and puts the blood arunning hot through me again." She swayed on her feet and sputtered out the fragments of an old skin-scraping song. "Now, there you go—can't you never learn not to drink it all to once? That way, it don't last so long, and you're out before you get to feeling good."

Hwoogh staggered as the brew took hold of him, and his knees bent ever farther under him. The bed came up in his face, his head was full of bees buzzing merrily, and the cave spun around him. He roared at the cave, while Keyoda laughed.

"Heh! To hear you ayelling, a body might think you was the only Chokanga left on earth. But you ain't—no, you ain't!"

"*Hrumkh?*" That struck home. To the best of Hwoogh's knowledge, there were no others of his kind left on earth. He grabbed at her and missed, but she fell and rolled against him, her breath against his face.

"So? Well, it's the truth. The kid up and told me. Legoda found three of 'em, just like you, he says, up the land to the east, three springs ago. You'll have to ask him I dunno nothing about it." She rolled over against him, grunting half-formed words, and he tried to think of this new information. But the brew was too strong for his head, and he was soon snoring beside her.

Keyoda was gone to the village when he awoke, and the sun was a spear length high on the horizon. He rummaged around for a piece of the liver, but the flavor was not as good as it had been and his stomach protested lustily at going to work again. He leaned back until his head got control of itself, then swung down to the creek to quench a thirst devil that had seized on him in the night.

But there was something he should do, something he half remembered from last night. Hadn't Keyoda said something about others of his people? Yes, three of them, and Legoda knew. Hwoogh hesitated, remembering that he had bested Legoda the day before; the young man might resent it today. But he was filled with an overwhelming curiosity, and there was a strange yearning in his heart. Legoda must tell him.

Reluctantly, he went back to the cave and fished around in a hole that was a secret even from Keyoda. He drew out his treasures, fingering them reverently, and selecting the best. There were bright shells and colored pebbles, a roughly drilled necklace that had belonged to his father, a sign of completed manhood, bits of this and that with which he had intended to make himself ornaments. But the quest for knowledge was stronger than the pride of possession; he dumped them out into his fists and struck out for the village.

Keyoda was talking with the women, whining the stock formula that she had developed, and Hwoogh skirted around the camp, looking for the young artist. Finally he spotted the Talker out behind the camp, making odd motions with two sticks. He drew near cautiously, and Legoda heard him coming.

"Come near, Chokanga, and see my new magic." The young man's voice was filled with pride, and there was no threat to it. Hwoogh sighed with relief, but sidled up slowly. "Come nearer, don't fear me. Do you think I'm sorry of the gift I made? Nay, that was my own stupidity. See."

He held out the sticks and Hwoogh fingered them cautiously. One was long and springy, tied end to end with a leather thong, and the other was a little spear with a tuft of feather on the blunt end. He grunted a question.

"A magic spear, Hairy One, that flies from the hand with wings, and kills beyond the reach of other spears." Hwoogh snorted. The spear was too tiny to kill more than rodents, and the big stick had not even a point. But he watched as the young man placed the sharp stick to the tied one, and drew back on it. There was a sharp twang, and the little spear sailed out and away, burying its point in the soft bark of a tree more than two spear throws away. Hwoogh was impressed.

"Aye, Chokanga, a new magic that I learned in the south last year. There are many there who use it, and with it they can throw the point farther and better than a full-sized spear. One man may kill as much as three!" Hwoogh grumbled; already they killed all the good game, and yet they must find new magic to increase their power. He held out his hand curiously, and Legoda gave him the long stick and another spear, showing him how it was held. Again there was a twang, and the leather thong struck at his wrist, but the weapon sailed off erratically, missing the tree by yards. Hwoogh handed it back glumly—such magic was not for his kind. His thumbs made the handling of it even more difficult

Now, while the magic man was pleased with his superiority, was a good time to show the treasure. Hwoogh spread it out on the bare earth and gestured at Legoda, who looked down thoughtfully.

"Yes," the Talker conceded. "Some of it is good, and some would make nice trinkets for the women. What is it you want—more meat, or one of the new weapons? Your belly was filled yesterday; and with my beer, that was stolen, I think, though for that I blame you not. The boy has been punished already. And this weapon is not for you."

Hwoogh snorted, wriggled and fought for expression, while the young man stared. Little by little, his wants were made known, partly by signs, partly by the questions of the Cro-Magnon. Legoda laughed.

"So, there is a call of the kind in you, Old Man?" He pushed the treasure back to Hwoogh, except one gleaming bauble. "I would not cheat you, Chokanga, but this I take for the love I bear you, as a sign of our friendship." His grin was mocking as he stuck the valuable in a flap of his clout.

Hwoogh squatted down on his heels, and Legoda sat on a rock as he began. "There is but little to tell you, Hairy One. Three years ago I did run onto a family of your kind—a male and his mate, with one child. They ran from us, but we were near their cave, and they had to return. We harmed them not, and sometimes gave them food, letting them accompany us on the chase. But they were thin and scrawny, too lazy to hunt. When we returned next year, they were dead, and so far as I know, you are the last of your kind."

He scratched his head thoughtfully. "Your people die too easily, Chokanga; no sooner do we find them and try to help them than they cease hunting and become beggars. And then they lose interest in life, sicken and die. I think your gods must be killed off by our stronger ones."

Hwoogh grunted a half-assent, and Legoda gathered up his bow and arrows, turning back toward camp. But there was a strange look on the Neanderthaler's face that did not escape the young man's eyes. Recognizing the misery in Hwoogh's expression, he laid a hand on the old man's shoulder and spoke more kindly.

"That is why I would see to your well-being, Hairy One. When you are gone, there will be no more, and my children will laugh at me and say I lie when I spin the tale of your race at the feast fire. Each time that I kill, you shall not lack for food."

He swung down the single street toward the tent of his family, and Hwoogh turned slowly back toward his cave. The assurance of food should have cheered him, but it only added to his gloom. Dully he realized that Legoda treated him as a small child, or as one whom the sun god had touched with madness.

Hwoogh heard the cries and laughter of children as he rounded the hill, and for a minute he hesitated before going on. But the sense of property was well developed in him, and he leaped forward grimly. They had no business near his cave.

They were of all ages and sizes, shouting and chasing each other about in a crazy disorder. Having been forbidden to come on Hwoogh's side of the hill, and having broken the rule in a bunch, they were making the most of their revolt. Hwoogh's fire was scattered down the side of the hill into the creek, and they were busily sorting through the small store of his skins and weapons.

Hwoogh let out a savage yell and ran forward, his spear held out in jabbing position. Hearing him, they turned and jumped back from the cave entrance, clustering up into a tight group. "Go on away, Ugly Face," one yelled. "Go scare the wolves! Ugly Face, Ugly Face, waaaah!"

He dashed in among them, brandishing his spear, but they darted back on their nimble legs, slipping easily from in front of him. One of the older boys thrust out a leg and caught him, tripping him down on the rocky ground. Another dashed in madly and caught his spear away, hitting him roughly with it. From the time of the first primate, the innate cruelty of thoughtlessness had changed little in children.

Hwoogh let out a whooping bellow, scrambled up clumsily and was in among them. But they slipped nimbly out of his clutching hands. The little girls were dancing around gleefully, chanting: "Ugly Face ain't got no mother, Ugly Face ain't got no wife, waaaah on Ugly Face!" Frantically he caught one of the boys, swung him about savagely, and tossed him on the ground, where the youth lay white and silent. Hwoogh felt a momentary glow of elation at his strength. Then somebody threw a rock.

The old Neanderthaler was tied down crudely when he swam back to consciousness, and three of the boys sat on his chest, beating the ground with their heels in time to a victory chant. There was a dull ache in his head, and bruises were swelling on his arms and chest where they had handled him roughly. He growled savagely, heaving up, and tumbled them off, but the cords were too strong for him. As surely as if grown men had done it, he was captured.

For years they had been his enemies, ever since they had found that Hwoogh-baiting was one of the pleasant occupations that might relieve the tedium of camp life. Now that the old feud was about finished, they went at the business of subduing him with method and ingenuity.

While the girls rubbed his face with soft mud from the creek, the boys ransacked the cave and tore at his clothes. The rough bag in which he had put his valuables came away in their hands, and they paused to distribute this new wealth. Hwoogh howled madly.

But a measure of sanity was returning to them, now that the first fury of the fight was over, and Kechaka, the chief's eldest son, stared at Hwoogh doubtfully. "If the elders hear of this," he muttered unhappily, "there will be trouble. They'd not like our bothering Ugly Face."

Another grinned. "Why tell them? He isn't a man, anyway, but an animal; see the hair on his body! Toss old Ugly Face in the river, clean up his cave, and hide these treasures. Who's to know?"

There were half-hearted protests, but the thought of the beating waiting for them added weight to the idea. Kechaka nodded finally, and set them to straightening up the mess they had made. With broken branches, they eliminated the marks of their feet, leaving only the trail to the creek.

Hwoogh tossed and pitched in their arms as four of them picked him up; the bindings loosened somewhat, but not enough to free him. With some satisfaction, he noted that the boy he had caught was still retching and moaning but that was no help to his present position. They waded relentlessly into the water, laid him on it belly down, and gave him a strong push that sent him gliding out through the rushing stream. Foaming and gasping, he fought the current, struggling against his bonds. His lungs ached for air, and the current buffeted him about; blackness was creeping up on his mind.

With a last desperate effort he tore loose the bonds and pushed up madly for the surface, gulping in air greedily. Water was unpleasant to him, but he could swim, and struck out for the bank. The children were disappearing down the trail, and were out of sight as he climbed from the water, bemoaning his lost fire that would have warmed him. He lumbered back to his cave and sank soddenly on the bed.

He, who had been a mighty warrior, bested by a snarling pack of Cro-Magnon brats! He clenched his fists savagely and growled, but there was nothing he could do. Nothing! The futility of his own effort struck down on him like a burning knife. Hwoogh was an old man, and the tears that ran from his eyes were the bitter, aching tears that only age can shed.

Keyoda returned late, cursing when she found the fire gone, but her voice softened as she spied him huddled in his bed, staring dully at the wall of the cave. Her old eyes spotted the few footprints the boys had missed, and she swore with a vigor that was almost youthful before she turned back to Hwoogh.

"Come, Hairy One, get out of that cold, wet fur!" Her hands were gentle on the straps, but Hwoogh shook her aside. "You'll be sick, lying there on them few leaves, all wet like that. Get off that fur, and I'll go back to the village for fire. Them kids! Wait'll I tell Legoda!"

Seeing there was nothing he would let her do for him, she turned away down the trail. Hwoogh sat up to change his furs, then lay back. What was the use? He grumbled a little, when Keyoda returned with the fire, but refused the delicacies she had wheedled at the village, and tumbled over into a fitful sleep.

The sun was long up when he awoke to find Legoda and Keyoda fussing over him. There was an unhappy feeling in his head, and he coughed.

Legoda patted his back. "Rest, Hairy One. You have the sickness devil that burns the throat and runs at the nose, but that a man can throw off. *Ayeee*, how the boys were whipped! I, personally, attended to that, and this morning not one is less sore than you are. Before they bother you again, the moon will eat up the sun."

Keyoda pushed a stew of boiled liver and kidneys at him, but he shoved it away. Though the ache in his head had gone down, a dull weight seemed to rest on his stomach, and he could not eat. It felt as though all the boys he had fought were sitting on his chest and choking him.

Legoda drew out a small painted drum and made heavy magic for his recovery, dancing before the old man and shaking the magic gourd that drove out all sickness. But this was a stronger devil. Finally the young man stopped and left for the village, while Keyoda perched on a stone to watch over the sick man. Hwoogh's mind was heavy and numb, and his heart was leaden in his breast. She fanned the flies away, covering his eyes with a bit of skin, singing him some song that the mothers lulled their children with.

He slept again, stirring about in a nightmare of Talker mockery, with a fever flushing his face. But when Legoda came back at night, the magic man swore he should be well in three days. "Let him sleep and feed him. The devil will leave him soon. See, there is scarce a mark where the stone hit him."

Keyoda fed him, as best she could, forcing the food that she begged at the village down his throat. She lugged water from the creek as often as he cried for it, and bathed his head and chest when he slept. But the three days came and went, and still he was not well. The fever was little higher, and the cold little worse than he had gone through many times before. But he did not throw it off as he should have done.

Legoda came again, bringing his magic and food, but they were of little help. As the day drew to a close, he shook his head and spoke low words to Keyoda. Hwoogh came out of a half stupor and listened dully. "He tires of life, Keyoda, my father's sister." The young man shrugged. "See, he lies there not fighting. When a man will not try to live, he cannot."

"Ayyeah!" Her voice shrilled dolefully. "What man will not live if he can? Thou are foolish, Legoda."

"Nay. His people tire easily of life, O Keyoda. Why, I know not. But it takes little to make them die." Seeing that Hwoogh had heard, he drew closer to the Neanderthaler. "O Chokanga, put away your troubles, and take another bite out of life. It can still be good, if you choose. I have taken your gift as a sign of friendship, and I would keep my word. Come to my fire, and hunt no more; I will tend you as I would my father."

Hwoogh grunted. Follow the camps, eat from Legoda's hunting, be paraded as a freak and a half-man! Legoda was kind, sudden and warm in his sympathy, but the others were scornful. And if Hwoogh should die, who was to mourn him? Keyoda would forget him, and not one Chokanga would be there to show them the ritual for burial.

Hwoogh's old friends had come back to him in his dreams, visiting him and showing the hunting grounds of his youth. He had heard the grunts and grumblings of the girls of his race, and they were awaiting him. That world was still empty of the Talkers, where a man could do great things and make his own kills, without hearing the laughter of the Cro-Magnons. Hwoogh sighed softly. He was tired, too tired to care what happened.

The sun sank low, and the clouds were painted a harsh red. Keyoda was wailing somewhere, far off, and Legoda beat on his drum and muttered his magic. But life was empty, barren of pride.

The sun dropped from sight, and Hwoogh sighed again, sending his last breath out to join the ghosts of his people.

Unto Him That Hath
[as by Philip St. John]

The lunch room was half-filled, and Captain Michael Dane stopped at the door, feeling like a fool. The almost-as-good substitute they'd given him for his right leg suddenly dragged, and the worn, faded uniform felt out of place here among the trim flying officers and men. Lambert Field had been home before he went off to the front; but he'd been whole and in fashion then.

Now he was attracting attention by just standing there. He moved up to the counter, selecting the old seat at the end. He sank down tiredly. There had been too many planes, too many flights, too long a time in the hospital, and now too much mystery and haste in getting him back.

"Coffee—just coffee," he ordered as a waitress came up to him. "Black and hot." He shouldn't have come into the place; it was silly to expect things to stay the same while he was gone—stupid to waste time on a whim, when he should have been reporting to the Dane Aircraft buildings down at the end of the field.

The coffee was suddenly in front of him, and he reached for it. But a hand was in his way. "Still three lumps, Mike?"

He looked up at that. Molly was four years older, but those years had done well by her. She'd filled out a bit, and had learned to use her brown hair as a setting for her oval face, instead of looking like a tousled tomboy. Now she lifted the end of the counter and came around to sit beside him. There were no rings on the left hand she dropped over his. "Been a long time, Mike—too long for no letters."

He pretended not to hear the last. There was nothing he could say. He'd told her he wouldn't write and wouldn't let her be tied down to a man who might not come back. He'd kept his word. Now he shrugged, and turned his palm up to meet hers. "Too long, kid. I thought you'd be in school, instead of here."

"I'm helping out while I'm back. Be here a few weeks before the position I took with Caltech is ready for me."

"Caltech?" he shook his head in admiration. "I suppose that means you're a Ph.D physicist now, with gravity all figured out, and fields doing dances at your whim. You promised you'd let me see your doctorate thesis."

She grimaced. "Not when they mark it Ultra Top Secret. But you'll see it on the planes one of these days. I found something—a whole new field of physics. I told you I would, and I did…How's it feel to be back?"

"Lousy." He jerked his thumb back toward a table where a pink-faced major was declaiming on how they had to dig out their H-bombs and use them against Pan-Asia. Dane had heard little else since he'd been back, and there was no way of convincing the natural fools that it would be world suicide. Somehow, up to now both sides had managed to avoid turning it into an all-out fatal atomic war.

Pan-Asia was afraid the American Alliance had too many such bombs for them, and the Alliance knew how little it could do with bombs against the decentralized enemy, whose one great manufacturing center had somehow remained undiscoverable. But the Alliance was losing, now. In five grinding years of technological warfare, the despised Pan-Asians had proved themselves technologically modern, and with heavier manpower. The Alliance had been retreating across the Dnieper when Mike was wounded, and were now fighting a slow retreat through central Europe. And the fools here were braying for their favorite horror weapon, to kill off everyone! Then Mike shrugged and tightened his grip on Molly's hand. "And good," he added. "How's Dad?"

She shook her head uneasily. "I've barely seen him, Mike. He looks happy in a feverish way—and worried. And he wants you back, pretty badly. Something funny is going on, and everything's wrapped tight in a blanket of hush-hush. You'd better report in—but come back, Mike!"

Mike nodded and got up to leave, glad to get away from the smug stupidity of the major who thought he could end war by using something so ugly neither side had dared to touch it. He'd probably been one of the fools who had once thought they could lick Pan-Asia with a single hand, because everyone knew the enemy didn't have the Alliance's technical know-how. Some would never learn better, though the Pan-Asian jets and tanks were rolling forward month by month.

Mike went down the walk, and the weariness was heavier in him. His leg ached, and the toes he no longer had felt cramped. He caught himself limping, and forced himself to stop that. It was only habit; the prosthetic device was completely serviceable. He could even tap-dance with it, if he'd been of a mind to try it.

The Dane Aircraft buildings had spread since he had seen them. They now occupied the whole end of the field, and spread out, enclosing a small helicopter field of their own. He should have guessed it. His father had always been a whizz when he really tried, and the Dane planes had been the only ones to consistently meet the best that Pan-Asia could throw at them.

A guard snapped up smartly. "Halt! Captain, this is restricted. You'll have to get a pass."

"Don't be a damned fool," Mike told him, with the military formality typical on the real front. "Crank your little phone and tell Dane or Enright that Mike's reporting in."

The guard gulped, unused to facing men who were bored by the authority of a gun. He fumbled, and half-turned toward his box. But before he could reach it, a heavy baritone let out a yell. Enright hadn't changed. He was still a small man, with shoulders that were too big for him, and a wild mop of black hair that fell across his steel-rimmed glasses. Now he came running out, rubbing grease off his hands against his coveralls. Mike noticed there were oak-leaves on his collar. But there was nothing military about him.

He came up, sticking out a callused hand. "Mike, we've been waiting for you for hours! What happened?"

"A general overrode my priority—claimed he had a sick baby here. So I hitched with a supply ship." Enright had been foreman since Mike could first remember. Mike thumped him on the back, and snapped his finger against the insignia. "Brass!"

Enright seemed embarrassed, but he grinned. "Needed them here. Anybody who can use a wrench on anything half secret gets drafted as an officer. I hear they've got eagles waiting for you. You're looking good, Mike!"

Mike knew it was a lie, but he grinned politely. "Thanks. What's it all about, anyhow? I can guess that Dad wanted me back as soon as I was off the active lists. But why the big fuss about rushing me here, getting me secrecy clearance, and everything else?"

"Big times, I guess," Enright answered, and his voice was a little bitter. "I know your father and Custer have some superdooper plan on called 'Project Swipe,' but I don't know what it's all about. Anyhow, the Dane works are big enough for your father to throw his weight around now, so maybe he just felt like doing that."

They were back in the first hangar Dane Aircraft had used for its original plant. Now it seemed to be the experimental building and administration offices. Enright led back through a maze of elaborate machinery. "Built the first atomic athodyd right here," he said. "Now we're supposed to be finished with development on the robots, and everything's laid off until Project Swipe comes through."

The athodyds were a bitter memory; they'd been developed by Mike's father and one of the leading nuclear physicists, and should have given the Alliance complete air mastery, replacing the jets with a much more powerful drive. But somehow, the Pan-Asians had managed to get the secret in advance, and it had been all the more in their favor. They'd never found the spy, either. He knew very little of robots, beyond the fact that they were a fantastically improved version of the automatic pilot and bomb-sight combined.

There were rumors that Pan-Asia already had a model of it.

They went back through the silent hangar toward the offices built at the rear. Then Mike caught sight of his father's back, and he mounted the few steps more briskly. Dane was bent over a complicated chart, pointing out to a man wearing soiled fatigues and an Air Force cap with two stars on it.

He swung around at the sound of Mike's steps. "Hi, Let's have a look at you…and you look rotten, boy. Should have pulled you back before they made a useless wreck of you."

But his face flicked from worry to the old smile Mike remembered, and his handshake was hard and eager. After all the false pleasantness, his words were pure relief. The gray in big Bruce Dane's hair had spread a bit, and there were new lines in his face, but he looked about same as Mike remembered him. Then he turned quickly.

"General Custer, this is my son, Mike. You two know about each other."

Mike found the other's handclasp almost like his father's, and his liking for the general was instantaneous. Custer had been head of an engineering department at one of the major colleges until he was drafted into a commission. He'd gone up rapidly, then, but he'd still considered himself a scientist, rather than a big brass. His somewhat heavy body had none of the false erectness of a typical military attempt at pretending first-class condition, and the grin on his sharp-featured face met Mike's eyes without hesitating over the fact he was a mere captain.

"Hi, Mike. They call me Bob around here. We thought you were going to miss Project Swipe." At the mention, worry touched his face, as it did that of Mike's father. He swung to the older man. "Bruce, I still wish you'd let me take it."

"Not a chance. Who's idea was it, anyhow? Mike, remember those arguments we used to have? Over those magazine stories you started me reading?"

"The fantasy ones, you mean?" Mike asked, and a touch of a smile began on his face. His father had always detested the use of that name for them, insisting that anything men who believed in science could do, other men would do.

"Fantasy, hell! That atomic athodyd will take us right into the era of space flight, once we get this war out of the way. And we'll be building robots here in a month—maybe not quite like men, but able to *think*. I got you back here to show you you've lost your bet—Bob and I've proved the stuff isn't fantasy!"

"There's still time travel," Mike told him. He grinned slowly, and felt a touch of bitterness against the two rise in spite of it. While he'd been fighting a war, they'd been playing with the ideas in the magazines, apparently. Maybe they'd done their share, but it sounded like a game, rather than serious business.

His father had passed across a gadget, and he took it, surprised at its lightness. "It's a tool," Custer explained. "Must be—though we haven't figured out what it's for. Looks like a wrench, but no nut ever looked like that. Try to break it."

Mike tried, and gasped. It looked and felt fragile enough to be ruined by a child, but he couldn't bend it. He frowned and handed it back. "So?"

"From the future," his father told him. Then he gathered up his equipment—charts and a huge old pipe—and headed back towards a heavy door at the far end of the hangar. "This time, I'm going to give it full power, Bob. You two keep your eyes on the catcher."

The door opened, revealing a room beyond, but it shut almost at once. While it was opened, a high whine of dynamos had come in. General Custer pulled Mike to the side, where a heavy window was covered by a shutter. He threw back the shutter, and pointed.

The big interior of the building was without other openings. At the near end, Mike saw four big gas turbines driving generators, leading into what seemed to be gigantic oil capacitors, and a small control board connected to them. Beyond, he could see only a grid of silver bars at the ceiling and on the floor, opposed to each other.

"What nonsense…?" he began.

Custer shook his head. "No nonsense, Mike. Bruce and I got an idea, and tried it out on a small scale. The government was convinced enough to finance Project Swipe, so it can't be too crazy. We're actually reaching into the future. Look, we're losing the war—we know that. Pan-Asia is matching our technology and beating our manpower. But somewhere ahead, they've got things that Pan-Asia can't have—and we're going to get some of that. The wrench came from a small trial run with the machine…And this time, the two of us—and now you—are the only ones who know what's going on, so Pan-Asia won't get it!"

"So you get a bunch of junk from the future," Mike began.

Custer shook his head. "Not if your father's right. He thinks this works best where there's a big explosion of some kind—loosens the time fabric, or something. That should give us at least something technical, where we can rob ideas. Watch—power's about up!"

The controls were being tested carefully by Bruce Dane and the man nodded. He began to move them carefully, according to his chart. Finally, he threw a switch. Above the banks of capacitors, a huge relay switched down. Even outside, there was a peculiar strain, and the air between the two big silver grids seemed to crackle with invisible fury.

Something began to form there. At first it seemed far away and tenuous. Then, without seeming to move, it appeared to rush in and grow. A corona of bluish fire sprang up around it, and then vanished.

Bruce Dane was working frantically at the control-board, and now he seemed to be driven by sudden desperation. His hands shot out toward the big switch—Something wrenched at the bank of capacitors, and the generators arced violently. But it was hardly visible before darkness hit the laboratory to be followed by a deafening explosion, like the air rushing together to make thunder, after a lightning bolt. The wall where Mike and Custer stood shook.

They were at the big door at once, and Custer had a flashlight, either grabbed up or in his hands all along. He worked the lock frantically. Then the door opened ponderously, and they were inside the room.

At one end, something that might have been either a wingless plane or a guided missile rested between the grids. But most of the power equipment, including the control-board, was completely gone, without a trace. And there was no sign of Bruce Dane.

It took a week to adjust to it. Captain Dane stayed on while they searched futilely, and gave up. It was Captain Dane who dragged out the only possible answer—that there was a reaction for every action, and that something had been sucked forward to balance what was brought back. He helped them inspect the queer thing they had brought back, and he gave the first order that they go to work on it, once he realized that the odd arrangement his father had made in getting the contract left him in charge, with Custer only his second.

He did what he could with the group of research experts who came flooding down on them, bringing the tools of their sciences. Each evening, he went automatically back to his father's apartment, ate, and went out to a bar to drink himself just tight enough to be sleepy.

Captain Dane had seen his friends killed for four years on the see-sawing fields of Europe, and he could take it. But he was an automation, created around the flesh of Mike Dane, and sooner or later, Mike had to find it out for himself.

That came on the seventh night, while he sat in the little bar. He was thinking dully of his father's words: "In a big city, the only place where a man has privacy—real privacy, even from his own habits—is in a bar."

And suddenly, he realized his father was dead, within all the abilities they had to tell. He lifted the scotch to his lips and drank it slowly, letting Captain Dane sink back, while Mike Dane grew used to the idea. For a while, it was rough, even though his father had gone in a peak of triumph few men could have equaled. Then his mind took the ache and the pain and put them where they should be—as real as ever, but in a corner where they could no longer keep him from continuing his own life.

He swallowed the drink, and realized that he'd been seeing Molly for at least five minutes without noticing her. She stood at the front of the place, staring uncertainly toward him, and started back as he looked up and nodded.

"Sober, Mike?" Her words were nervous, and her fingers were doing strange things to the lapels of her little jacket.

"Reasonably," he answered truthfully. He ordered her old drink automatically, and managed a passable grin. "I was in the lunchroom, but they told me you'd left. Figured you'd gone to Caltech in a hurry."

Her eyes seemed to shine suddenly at that. "Better, Mike. I rate you, boy. I'm now a full colonel in the Air Forces, Research branch. My doctorate work is now a full project, and I'm in charge! Right near you—they cleared out the old Dowell hangar, rigged it up, and are almost ready to go—will be by the time I get my uniform. I've been looking all over to tell you the news—almost forgot this place."

"Top Secret, of course?"

"No, higher! I've arrived!"

He grinned at that. "Me, too, Molly. I may even be more no higher than you are, now that Dad's…gone away. I'm in full charge of the works."

She finished her drink, and nodded. "I heard he was on some kind of secret mission. And I saw Morley coming out of your place at one ayem—so maybe you do rate my top secret, if he's working for you. No more drinks, Mike. I need coffee more."

"My place?" he suggested. She nodded, and he felt relief wash over him. It wouldn't be so hard to face the empty apartment and realize his father was gone completely. The ache still lay in his mind, but he had learned that grief must never interfere with living.

It was afternoon when he went through the main hangar and back to the side building that still housed the Enigma. Now, almost as if for the first time, he shoved his way through the crowd of top-level experts and studied the thing.

It was no more than twenty feet long, and about half that diameter at its largest. There were no wings or fins, such as any normal plane or even guided missile should have, but he knew now that it had been designed as a fighter plane. The nose swept up bluntly, the upper half covered by a clear bubble of heavy plastic.

That had been smashed when they had stolen it from the future, and there had been three guns sticking from it, all horribly twisted—as twisted as the body of the young man in the strange, abbreviated uniform inside. He had been dead, even to the cells of his hair and skin. But the machine seemed unharmed except for its cabin, which had now been repaired.

From the nose, it had sloped back to a stubby tail. Under it were two small wheels, and over it a tiny hook, purpose unknown. Aside from that, the only features were the miniature jets on each side where the wings should be, set to swivel in complete circles—forwards, backwards, up or down. In the tail, another swivel nozzle or jet was hidden, which could also be turned in a complete circle sideways.

It obviously could never fly. The jets were designed to burn no fuel. Instead, their six-inch bores were lined with tiny bits of wire that pointed back toward the exit, and there was a coil of peculiar design around the front of each.

Custer came over, shaking his head. "You look better, Mike. Figured how she flies?"

"No. Anything new?"

"A little, but none of it good. Morley thinks those bits of wires work by the point-discharge principle that will keep a toy spinning when it's connected to a battery and high-voltage coil. And in that case, those coils must somehow collect the atmosphere ahead and pack it enough for the jets to do all the lifting."

Enright had come up, and was shaking his head vigorously from side to side. "Not now, Morley doesn't. He found the switch that turned them on, and tried it. Nothing happened!"

They had learned some things, but most of them were like that. The ship was split down the middle, horizontally. All the equipment was in the upper half, behind the pilot cabin. The lower half was apparently packed solid, and encased in something so hard and tough that diamond drills and a monatomic hydrogen torch had made no dent in it. But it held power. They were sure of that, since the big cables came from there to all the rest of the machine.

The metal of the hull was pure iron—chemically pure beyond even a trace of anything else they could find. Yet it was harder and tougher than the best beryllium steel they knew. At a hundred degrees below zero, it turned as soft as lead, but hardened again at higher temperatures—and then was nothing but soft iron. Something was done to it to give it its rustless, impervious toughness and its tensile strength of almost a million pounds an inch, but they had no idea of what.

He had accepted the experts' word that the controls were worked by magnetic current without too much surprise, though they went around muttering something about Ehrenhaft being proved false and seemed to regard it as something that shouldn't be. Here soft iron was used as insulation, and a peculiar plastic seemed to form the conductor.

Another group was going insane over a transformer that was connected to the big tank the X-rays had shown in the lower half of the ship—without revealing whether it was a storage battery or some kind of atomic converter with no radiation. The transformer looked normal enough, but its secondary delivered exactly one thousand volts at four hundred cycles per second, whether the primary was hooked to a storage battery, a tiny dry cell, a 1440 volt sixty cycle AC line, or a high tension coil that gave better than thirty-thousand volts. The gadget weighed about twenty pounds, and they'd put as much as fifty amperes through it without its warming up the slightest—fifty kilowatts, and probably only a small fraction of what it could carry!

It had a soft iron core, copper wire wound exactly like a normal transformer, and a thin smear of insulation. Substituting a new iron core made on the spot, or a new winding designed to fit had cut its ability to handle power, but had made no change in its constant output, though the use of both the new coil and core had given them only a rather poor ordinary transformer.

There was another transformer-like gadget on the back of each of the two seats in the cabin, apparently designed to rest on the pilots' shoulders and be strapped on. They had tried putting power into it, but there had been no results. The power disappeared, but nothing happened—no fields around it, no heating up, no sound or movement.

The worst case was something whose purpose they did know. The gadget that transformed electric current into magnetic current was a simple copper plate attached to an iron solenoid, with a winding of electric lines around it. That had worked perfectly with a substitute winding, a copied solenoid, or a new copper plate. But it hadn't worked with more than one thing substituted! There were bolts whose nuts simply slid on—and then couldn't be removed in any manner they tried. One of the tools they had found behind the seats removed them, but it seemed no more than a simple, transparent piece of plastic that simply grasped the nut loosely.

"How'd you find it worked?" Mike asked.

Custer grimaced. "There's an instruction book, Mike. It was nicely shoved into one of the tool kits, complete. Did you take a look at the lettering on the instruments?"

Mike had seen it. There were at least forty letters in the alphabet they used whenever this ship had been made. Some of them, like the Greek theta for "th" and the reversed e for "uh" were easy enough to decode. Some of the others seemed ridiculous, unless the pronunciation had undergone a change.

"So you couldn't read most of it?" he asked.

"No—we read it. We put a code boy on it, and he worked out a full translation. But did you ever look closely at a service manual on anything issued by the government? Sure, it told you to take such and such a nut off, and screw down such and such a switch. But I'll bet you never found one that gave the real purpose of a machine, how it was made, how to substitute parts if the right ones weren't around—in fact, anything but how to take it to pieces, put it together, and tune it up; even then, you had to know what it was all about by yourself."

He went back to his desk and returned with close-typed sheets of paper. Mike looked through them, and at the photostatted diagrams. He located the jets. The big coil at the nose was marked as being a supercharger, which would indicate it might somehow compress the air—-but he got no further information, and the thing still hadnn't worked at all.

Then he gulped. "What the heck is protergy?"

Morley had come up then, and his scowl deepened at the word. He picked up the sheets, rolled them carefully, and handed them back between thumb and forefinger to Custer, making a gesture of holding his nose. He was supposed to be one of the ten top physicists in the country, but he now looked like a simple, tired old mechanic.

"Protergy, kinergy, duration, extension, matter," he in disgust. "They make their handbooks less intelligent by giving basic theory. And from now on, never let me see a handbook that has that. It does more damage than good. Protergy is a state of excitation through extension, like gravity and magnetism, but the raw stuff from which they are made. Kinergy is a propagation of excitation through extension with a fixed relation to duration—light is made from it. Matter is a resonant matrix for the transformation of protergy to kinergy, or vice versa, and is itself composed of protergy in a kinergic state, causing a compression of extension within any given duration…I'm quoting, if you think it's pure mouthwash. And just between us, it doesn't mean a damned thing, couldn't mean anything, and shouldn't. It has something to do with crystals, too—but somehow, I get the idea that every single atom is a crystal to those boys! Incidentally, Custer, what did you think of that crack there about the non-Einsteinian recognition of the limitations of the law of conservation of matter and energy?"

Mike shook his head and moved away. Fortunately, it wasn't his business to understand, but only to work with Custer in trying to get results. He found one of the men working on a tube of something—or rather, two tubes each with a liquid oozing out. It was from the repair kit meant to glue together sheets of the iron covering of the ship. There were half a dozen such tubes.

"Works fine," the man said. "Spread A on one of the sheets, squirt B over it, and stick on another sheet. Only it won't work on anything except that cockeyed iron of theirs—won't work on that after the temper is drawn by too much cooling. But it sure does what it's meant to—the two sheets fuse together, exactly as strong as if they'd been one from the first."

Mike nodded and went on to look at other problems. The glue had obviously replaced welding and riveting in the future. At least he could understand its purpose. But most of the men here were working with machines that he couldn't understand, much less trying to grasp the principle of the gadget they were testing. He moved slowly back toward the big X-ray machine, wondering how much more they could cram into this building, and how long such a concentration of great brains could exist without Pan-Asia finding it out and sending over a super special bomb.

The Alliance had been crowded back even further now, and the few men in Washington who knew what was going on here were practically hanging on their phones for a word of something they could use to change the tide. They were desperate enough to accept time-machines as they'd once accepted an atomic-bomb which they couldn't really believe in.

The X-ray and torsion meter were apparently cooperating on one of the tiny "bombs" they had found at the nose of the ship. They looked like tin cans of normal size, with rounded noses and small finned tails. Apparently, they were loosely joined together at the center, but the full strength of the big torsion machine was making no progress in separating them.

The X-ray of one showed an inside that seemed to be mostly solid metal, but there was a confusion of parts near the end that could only be the elaborate check-and-balance arrangement of a fuse. There was nothing that seemed capable of holding the front and back together, in spite of what the torsion machine was failing to do.

"Can't even get one of these apart," the technician said, picking up one of the tiny "bullets" that had been on a belt on one of the ruined machine guns at the front of the Enigma. "I've got a couple of guys out in the inner field, trying to crack one open. Thought they might contain some liquid or gas that was bad medicine. But..."

"Get them back!" Mike told him sharply. "Before they blow off an arm or leg. Besides, this stuff stays inside this building, unless you want to run a security stretch of five years! Call them in!"

The technician scowled, and then began to look scared. He was gone at a run toward the entrance, to double through the main hangar toward the inner field.

Mike turned the thing over in his hand gingerly, looking at its X-ray picture, which seemed to show nothing but a rough roll of metal inside the waxy coating, and something that might have been a percussion cap—it was too faint to tell. The thing itself looked like a small tubular capacitor without the wires trailing from the ends.

Enright seemed to have the same idea. He came up, with Custer and Morley arguing something esoteric a few feet behind, and took the little bullet out of Mike's hands. "Might glue wires on them and sell them for tubular condensers," he said.

Morley let out a sudden yell. "Electrostatics!" He caught the power switch on the torsion machine in a running jump, and set it into reverse. His face was white when he turned back.

"Electrostatic force...it has to be. The plates of a charged capacitor don't separate easily, either. And yet...my God, the number of farads that would take! Dane, Custer, you can be glad that machine couldn't crack it—or the whole building would be dust—nothing but dust…"

Something slapped against the back wall, and the two feet of reinforced concrete jerked inwards. Mike felt himself hit the floor, while the big X-ray machine crashed within inches of him. There was a roaring sharper than any explosion he had heard, and the laboratory shook again. But its construction had been sound enough to save them, except for bruises. They got up, staring through the dust that was everywhere.

"Pan-Asia…" Custer began.

Mike shook his head, finding trouble with his tongue at first. "A damned fool—and the end of a couple of men who followed orders," he said. "They cracked one of these smaller bullets!"

He limped forward to peer out, and then turned back, sick. The technician whose bright idea it had been was still partly there, though completely dead. There was nothing he could see at a quick glance of the two men who had done the trick somehow. And that had been only the smallest of the gadgets!

Mike sat glumly in the seat beside Molly, staring up at the stars. She had given up trying to talk, and was now driving quietly.

How did those stars look, he wondered, where the Enigma had been made? How far ahead? And if they cracked her mystery, could a weapon like that end wars for good and for all? He could see no possibility for a nation ever risking fighting another when even the bullets of the time were the equal of a blockbuster, the small bombs must be as good as A-bombs, and the big ones—well, if Custer and Morley were right, the huge capacitor that lay in the belly of the Enigma and furnished her power must be far stronger than any H-bomb could be. How many electrons…no, that was meaningless. They didn't pack electrons in so much as they somehow strained space…as meaningless as the babble about protergy and kinergy. The result was that one hundred percent of the energy could be released in a billionth of a second or less —probably millions of horsepower hours, in almost no time!

He wondered how they got the energy they stored there, and why they should use so much to power a plane, if the size of the huge capacitor tank meant anything. With the constant voltage transformer working in reverse, they could pack it in; feed in a steady thousand volts, and it would go on working, even if the voltage inside the capacitor went up into the millions. But how could they hold such voltages?

With such a weapon, there could be no war. And that was the dream of the scientists like Molly, whatever she had found; it had been the dream of his father, and he had always shared it.

Yet up there in the future, where such power was used on a small pursuit ship, war was obviously a part of their life! Mass production fighters weren't made without a role to play. He shook his head in the breeze the car was creating, trying to picture such a world into which this world was headed. Or was it? If they cracked the secret, then they would have something that future had not had in its past. And with a multiple-choice future, they might even find a road to permanent peace for themselves!

Molly stopped the car outside the gate, where the same guards were still posted, in a pretense that all was normal inside, and that no special protection was necessary. She ruffled his hair and kissed him quickly. "Be careful whatever you're up to, Mike."

Then she was gone back toward the city. He passed the guards, and went inside to the office. There, his flying clothes were all laid out, together with an oxygen tank and mask. He'd thought of taking a parachute, but there wasn't room for it in his case; his body was too long for the cramped space inside the Enigma, anyhow.

Only Custer and Enright were there, where they'd knocked down the rest of the wall, and wheeled the Enigma out in the darkness onto the inner field.

"All set up?" he asked Custer.

The general nodded. "Every bit of test equipment on board. And I hope you can learn something more in actual flight than we seem to be getting the other way. Sure you still want to try it? We've got test pilots for such things."

"I started out testing Dad's planes and flying jitneys by the seat of my pants." Mike took a last drag on his cigarette and mashed it out. "Anybody you'd rather see go in her?"

Enright croaked hoarsely. "Me. I've flown them off the drawing board, too, Mike—before I went into the shop. I…"

His face was pleading, almost tearful in the light of the small, deeply shaded bulb. But Custer shook his head quickly, and the little man stepped back, his fists knotted convulsively. Mike tried to grin a farewell, and climbed in.

There was barely room in the pilot's seat, once he had stopped to get under the transformer gadget that used up power with no result. He squirmed in, and reached for the throttle; at least the handbook had shown which parts were which, and he had spent all the afternoon studying the transliteration. He'd even found that one gadget kept it from starting when it had no room to fly. He cut on power.

The only result was a red bulb that flashed on at the top of his control panel. He bent forward, trying to read the tiny letters of light it revealed. "Safety straps unfastened" was as close as he could decode it. He started to look down at the seat, but the movement made him brush against the straps hanging from the mystery transformer. On a guess, he shoved his arms through them. The light went out.

This time, as he moved the single control back, indicators flashed green. He'd already figured how the thing worked, though. Back for up, twist for turn, sideways to roll over, and a tighter or looser grip to regulate his speed. It seemed simple.

He pulled the lever all the way back, and squeezed down on it. Ahead, the side of the building suddenly flashed down out of sight, and a steady roar came from beside him.

It was easy. The jets could lift the ship like a helicopter, but at a speed no helicopter could match. And the ship seemed to be inherently stable, in spite of its forbidding appearance. The response to any control was instantaneous and effortless, but he climbed to something he guessed to be three miles up before he tried any real maneuvering. Then he switched to horizontal, and felt her leap ahead. He increased the power. The wind roared, and the ship bucked faintly with the old familiar feeling of crossing the supersonic barrier. If the dial meant what he thought it did, his airspeed was now better than 1200 miles per hour, and he'd only started to put on power.

He changed back to vertical and went straight up, but this time the ship tilted—apparently by some automatic device, since he knew of no forward and backward tilting control—and kept her blunt nose facing the flight line. She lifted, rising to thirty thousand feet. The thrust was still full powered, even in the thinner air—the coils that serve as superchargers must work, somehow, but only when in actual flight. However they managed to compress the air, they were efficient. He lifted further, going up to forty thousand, sixty thousand, and beyond. His estimate of the heights on the indicator showed a top of better than twenty-five miles, though the air should have been too thin there for any compressor to work. But she was up to twenty miles now, and still rising.

It was enough for him. He set her on a straight course, and tried the maximum speed. At what looked like a little better than twenty-five hundred miles an hour, she began to shake—the plastic replacement they had made was unable to take it. He slowed back to a thousand, wondering how they kept the ship cool. There was no sign of her heating up from friction. He cut into a tight spiral, and began heading downwards a little. The response was amazing. At that speed, she turned about in the air like a light-plane stunting.

Then it hit him—there was no blackout, though such a circle must be putting at least twenty gravities pressure on him! It felt like a leisurely turn in a slow car! And the tension that should have warned him to ease off on the controls had never hit him.

Anti-gravity, or synthetic gravity neutralizing the pull by an exact counter pull? It must be some such device—probably the gadget that he'd called a transformer at the back of his neck. If it were adjusted to maintain a feeling of one gravity, naturally it would show no results when lying quietly in a one gravity field!

He found his course toward the testing ground that had been cleared and abandoned during the beginning of the war. It was again posted and waiting for him. He came over it at fifty thousand feet, set the cross-hairs of the tiny sight, and pulled down on the bomb-trigger that was to release one of the tin-can sized bombs.

The ship steadied and went into a climb, without a move on his part. It went up to eighty-thousand feet. Then something clicked, just as his eyes caught the target in the cross-hairs again. He seemed to hang there for long minutes, before he finally realized he was again cruising on. Then, at last, hell blossomed below him. His work was finished, and Custer and Morley would have their check on whether the stuff worked as they expected. But he already knew that a ship with a full load of such cans could do more damage than their top-sized bombers, all combined.

The return was routine. He centered the field in the same cross-hairs, lining them up to touch the spot from which he'd taken off. For a second, he had to stop to realize it was still dark down there—but the system must have worked by infra red, since the image was clearly lighted in the little sight. Mike touched a button marked "Land," and waited. The ship began dropping smoothly, and came to an exact landing on her own. She even cut power and released the straps from his shoulders.

He snapped off his mask, and ducked down and out of the little door, squinting through the darkness. "Back safe and sound," he shouted softly. "And after this, a comet will seem like an ox-cart."

A flashlight picked him out, and Custer's voice drifted out to him. "Come in here, Mike!"

The tones were warning that something was up. But it was a totally inadequate warning for what the flashlight revealed.

The end of the laboratory beyond was a complete wreck. There was no pattern, even, to the twisted, distorted shapes that lay there. It was as if a fire beyond any heat men had experienced had suddenly melted two sets of machinery into one, and yet had left parts of each untouched.

Mike stared stupidly about.

"The capacitor bank and dynamos have come home," Custer said, and his voice was almost a whisper. "I was just moving back when I saw it. They were just a ghost—then here they were, right in the middle of our equipment. Two objects, one space. The riddle is answered—they didn't explode. They just got out of each other's way, molecule by molecule. From the wind, I'd say the air got completely out of the way."

He swept the beam around again. "A minute before you landed. I've been trying to think. Machinery heavier than the ship…didn't go as far… maybe action and reaction not the same…"

But the torch was still centered on the foreground of the ruins, and his mind was clearly not on what he was saying.

Mike took the flash, and began going over what he could of the rubble. Then he turned. "No. No control panel here. And that means that Dad—or whatever is left of him—didn't come back. Better get the few men we can trust completely to clear this mess out with arc cutters and clear it away."

"I'll take care of it," Custer agreed heavily. "It looks as if we're washed up here, Mike. Most of our stuff is ruined between the explosion and this. And we can't work here, anyhow, if there's—more to come!"

"The scientists and technicians can take what's left. And the readings on my flight and whatever they need from the Enigma. They'll know where to ship it. I suppose you'll have to go to Washington to arrange for it—one of us will, anyhow…"

His leg ached again, as if the toes were curled up tightly and he was resting his full weight on them. But there was no time to think of that. The mess had to be cleared away, space had to be left for anything that came back, or whatever it might do. He'd have to post guards here, and somehow make them keep watch without telling the whole story.

No wonder Pan-Asia was nearing the Rhine. They hadn't developed a time machine to curse them with false gifts.

The same idea was in his mind, only greatly strengthened, when they met with those in Washington who knew of Project Swipe. At six hundred feet below street level, where most of the higher echelon actually met, even the best construction and air-conditioning had never overcome the cold and the dampness that was in spirit more even than fact. Mike's missing leg ached worse, and his thoughts were more bitter than ever.

The assistant to the Secretary of Defense opened the business briefly. "So far, gentlemen, we've spent months of preparing, a great deal of effort concealing, and five weeks of actual operation of this project. The Dane Aircraft works have come to approximately a standstill—and you know the need for those planes as well as I do—because we've been forced to screen out most of the workers, and keep only a token staff there; since our contract guarantees normal operations, the tax-payers will have to foot that bill. We've also tied up most of the great research organizations of the Alliance this last month. And unless my preliminary information is false, the enemy has only failed to penetrate our security because there has been nothing to learn, not because our most strenuous efforts have kept an airtight net. Dr. Morley, will you sum up what the laboratories keyed to your section have discovered?"

"Just a minute," another man asked. Mike didn't know him, but he could guess that he must be from the President's office, from the looks directed his way. "How do we know this wasn't meant for us to find? Can we say it was a genuine plane?"

Custer stood up. "It was an actual war-plane, and one that had seen combat. Nothing we have short of an H-bomb could have ruined the plastic bubble, as it was first found. Nothing could have killed every cell in the pilot's body, to our current knowledge. The notice pasted inside the handbook, recommending action if forced down in enemy territory, confirms the desperation of those using the plane. We don't know whom they were fighting—or what—but this was no fake. It was a die-stamped job, mostly—and that means mass production. They've got war up there, and it's something we'd better forget, if we want to stay sane. All right, Dr. Morley."

Morley shook himself, and began reciting what they knew. The capacitors—big and little—were just that; the piece they had recovered from Mike's single bombing had proved it. But it was impossible for such capacitors to exist. Capacitors carried a charge according to the product of the plate area and number, times the dielectric constant of insulation, all divided by the thickness of the dielectric. Size, number of plates, and thickness could only be altered within limits. So in the future, they had apparently found a material with a nearly infinite dielectric constant! He tried to explain how impossible that was, but Mike lost track of some of that. Anyhow, they now knew that this dielectric was a thin smear of a lacquer-like substance, the same as their insulation, and would stand up under a voltage that exceeded anything imaginable for such a thin substance—several million volts.

"Naturally, it's completely self-healing when cut or punctured," he added. "It seals a cut instantly, or you'd get a short through the air around your condenser. I am informed it's composed of helium, lithium, argon, fluorine, bismuth and carbon. I have no idea of how they managed to make a compound out of inert gases. And I have even less idea of how they polymerized the stuff. We don't know why it works, how it is made, nor how to duplicate its properties. It is completely outside all our knowledge."

Other accounts began to come in, of equally impossible things. Copper could not be alloyed with nitrogen—without forming a compound—but it had been handled that way. No alloy of simple tungsten and boron could stand up under a temperature of over 6000 degrees Centigrade, without pitting. Bolts that held their nuts on by magnetostriction couldn't have those nuts removed by a tool that was nothing but vinyl acetate.

Mike listened, trying to picture it all. The trouble was that men were only barbarians. Columbus had known that iron would sink, and had built his ships of wood. But if he'd been given a metal ship, his time couldn't have cast the plates for more such ships. DaVinci had conceived the helicopter, but it took centuries to develop the steels and alloys, with their heat treatments and other processing; he had had no power adequate in his time, and he couldn't have understood the ignition system of an engine if he'd found one. Men of the old stone age couldn't make rifles.

The chemists were the last, with their glum report on nonmetals that were completely pure but behaved like metals, paints that carried heat one way much better than the other, but couldn't be analyzed at all, and a host of other things.

There was only one weakly cheerful note. The head chemist of DuPont stood up, and he seemed almost too modest as he announced it. The trick glue that served to weld metals together could not only be duplicated already, but could be made in tanker lots at a reasonable figure. It was much simpler than they had thought. And it could be made to glue anything. The glue formed an open-ended chain molecule, and it would glue any element which was not attached at the end. The sample had contained all elements except iron, so it had worked on iron only. But he could provide one which contained only nitrogen, and which would glue all metals, although it didn't harm plants or animal substances. It was probably the greatest stride in a thousand years of sticking things together. Spread the glue, add the polymerizing fluid, and wait five minutes.

The assistant to the Secretary of Defense nodded. "A remarkable piece of work, doctor—it'll probably win you top honors in the field for the year. But since we're equipped to weld and rivet, and not to pressurize joints for five minutes, I suspect it won't help production for quite some time. Mr. Dane, what do you think?"

Mike grinned sourly. "It'd slow us up now. But you might spread a batch of it over the enemy by plane, and follow with the polymerizer. That *might* glue him down for a few days."

A few smiled, but nobody laughed.

Custer summed it up. "A gun would do *Pithecanthropus* no good. He couldn't use it without bullets—arrows wouldn't work. And if he knew about bullets, he still couldn't build a forge to melt his lead. Marconi couldn't have found out a thing about radar—and couldn't have built modern tubes if he'd had full instructions. Show Faraday twenty kilowatts going into an antenna and apparently nothing coming out, and he'd have given up physics to teach Latin the rest of his life!

"In the last fifty years, science has quintupled itself. In the next hundred, we can't imagine what it will be. Maybe they tailor the electron rings to make that transformer work, but I can't examine such things, and couldn't duplicate it in any event. Probably the men who designed it couldn't build one with our crude equipment. Unto him that hath, unto him shall be given. And we're still have-nots!"

He paused, watching their faces. Then he grimaced. "We don't even gain theoretical knowledge from it. We might think it proves the future is invariable, since getting this has made no change in our science. But it proves nothing. We can't change ourselves—but a man from that future might decide to come back and take over the world with some of their heavy armament that history shows doesn't exist now. In that case, the future might be changed—or he might be unable to do it…Our report, except perhaps for the metal glue, is—perfect failure, with a recommendation that nothing be done about it!"

There were no dissenters. Words spilled across the table, but they all boiled down to the same things as Custer had said.

Mike and Custer caught a plane back together. Mike was wondering whether they hadn't changed the future, after all. Pan-Asia was rumored to be past the Rhine, and the Alliance was behind schedule, in many ways because of this useless effort. The language in the handbook for the Enigma had been English—but would English even be used in the future toward which they headed now?

What kind of a world could exist that would make such a concentration of destruction as the Enigma a mass production affair? What could the men be like, and the scientists who would loose such things on the world, or the fighting men who knew the stupidity of war and still could not stop it? Or had they thought that such weapons would stop it? Every improvement made in killing power had brought with it the idea that war would grow too horrible, and peace would come. Yet each move had only made the horror worse. It was a vicious cycle that could only be broken by an explosion—and one which apparently lay far in the future.

He shrugged it off, and turned to Custer, who had remained in the assembly chamber longer than he had. "What happens to the Enigma?"

"We seal it up, and give it to a museum when the fracas is over."

Lock it up in a museum—and taunt and mock the men who would waste their lives trying to understand it, when they might do better never knowing it existed. Mike thought of Faraday turning to Latin after watching electricity flow into an antenna and vanish; if that had happened, the world would have been poorer in every way. The country that kept such a thing would always be under its insidious influence. He finished Custer's quotation in his head: "And from him that hath not, from him shall be taken away, even that which he seemeth to have!"

He started for the Dane buildings, where work was just going on toward restoring normal production. Then he shrugged. He was still as useless as he had been since his father had had him brought back at the start of this. Custer was the actual supervisor here, and Custer knew what orders they had from the government. He wanted a drink, someone to talk to about nothing. He swung toward Molly's new little apartment, half a mile beyond the field. He ought to propose, he supposed—or renew the old proposal of years before. He thought of her work—and the fact that she could never live a wholly normal life when wrapped up in it. But it didn't really matter. Molly was just Molly, no matter what turned up—the only woman he'd ever really liked.

He wasn't surprised when she didn't answer. She hadn't expected him back for at least two more days. But there would still be a drink in the place, and a chance to sleep until she returned. He pulled the key out of his pocket, and went in. There were two letters shoved through the slot in the door, and he picked them up and put them on the little table by the sofa.

Then he stopped. The table was littered, as if Molly had been doing some last minute hasty work before leaving. A cloth was thrown over it, but he saw enough to make him toss it back.

Iron insulation surrounded plastic "wires," and fed out from a square box to a little motor affair. A battery was disconnected, but he slipped it into place and held down the switch. Without coils or commutator, the motor began to turn.

Magnetic current! Somehow one of the little transformers from the ship must be hidden in that box, with its strange wires running out. And Molly had found how to make it work. Scientists with world-wide reputations had been stripped every night before they left the laboratory to make sure they would have nothing that could be picked up by the enemy. But Molly had this!

He remembered the atomic athodyd and the robots, which Pan-Asia now definitely had. And he remembered that no screening had ever found the man who was responsible. And Captain Dane was sick as he gathered up the apparatus and mashed it into a shapeless mess on the rug. Captain Dane went grimly to the phone to report the spy…

And Michael Dane put it back on the cradle without using it. Molly was still…Molly. And his mind had already rationalized his actions. Let the Pan-Asians have the scraps. They couldn't solve anything from what was left, and there'd be no more chance to steal parts of the ship. Let her go, knowing she'd been discovered by him, fleeing without knowledge of when the Alliance would pick her up. Or let her wonder about the damage, but still stay on to do her dirty work. A known spy was safer than anything else.

He threw his key down on the little pile of junk, and went out of the room to find a bar and get drunk. He had a lot to forget. The Enigma had cost him his father. It had probably ruined all chances of winning the war. And now it had taken Molly.

He had never found the bar. He had gone on walking, while his foot ached, and after he forgot about it. He had walked until it was dark, and the idea had come up from the darkness and grown clear in his mind. Then he had taken a cab and come back to the field. In the main hangar office, he found the single star that had finally come for him—an iron star, to show that he was only a producer of materials instead of a real military general, but still one which gave him authority enough. He snapped it onto the collar of his hastily donned flight clothes, and opened the door to the ruins that had been the laboratory, now deserted except for the six guards and the hulk of the Enigma.

He dismissed the men, giving them formal notes, and waited for them to leave. Then he switched the lights off and headed for the machine, again reassembled and ready for flight—or for plaguing men through the decades to come.

In the gloom, there was a sudden cough, and he swung to see Enright at the doorway, his face almost glowing under the light of a single bulb still on. Mike grimaced, but it didn't matter. Enright seemed to have some odd attachment to the machine, and the guards had complained about his hanging around. Now he stood there, licking his lips and staring at the Enigma.

His eyes switched to Mike. "You're taking her up, Mike? You're flying her again." He studied Mike, and nodded slowly, as if making up his mind. "And you're not coming back. You're going to destroy her. I thought of that, too. Mike—Mike, don't. Let me. I'm just a has-been, Mike—but I want to feel her in my hands once, After that, it won't matter…"

Mike shook his head. "It's my trip, and I'm older than you are, tonight. You're off bounds, Enright. If you're caught in here now, you'll be up for another security check. Better get back. Maybe you're right, and I'm going to destroy her. But it won't do for you to be found with me, if I do. You've got your boys to worry about, and I don't have anyone. Go on, scram!"

Enright licked his lips, and shook his head. "My boys! Yes, yes of course, Mike. Of course. But let me stay here a little longer, while you get her out."

"Okay," Mike told him. The man must be getting senile, he thought. But he'd forgotten one vital thing, and Enright could watch the plane while he went for it. "Stay, then. But you'd better go as soon as I get back. Only a minute."

He swung out to the entrance, and into the main hangar again. There was a flask of hydro-fluoric acid around somewhere, and that had already been proved capable of dissolving the trick metals and the trickier insulation, though they resisted even such a violent acid for a surprising length of time. He finally found it, and went back.

Enright was gone, and the little light bulb was out. Mike stumbled through the darkness, banging his shins on something that shouldn't have been there. He cursed, and decided vaguely that something should be done about men who left things in the middle where nothing was supposed to be. Then he grinned bitterly as he realized he wouldn't be around to do anything about it.

He found the steps to the control cabin of the Enigma, and went up them, and into the cabin. He reached for the door, just as a sudden loud noise shook the air of the laboratory. Probably the guards were trying to get back. He settled under the pseudo-transformer hastily, stuck his arms through the straps, and sent power into the wheels, to go moving out where take-off was possible.

It was only as the ship was lifting savagely that he realized the laboratory floor had been bare before. Some thing had come out of nowhere! Maybe the control-panel had finally come back—and his father! For a second, he started to settle back. But it was pointless. The corpse of Bruce Dane could do him no good, and he might have no chance to finish this business, if he were interrupted now. The Danes had saddled the world with the worst Trojan horse it had ever known. Now their debt had to be paid, as far as it could be paid.

He shook his mind almost free of thoughts, and went tearing upwards in the Enigma, crowding on full power. The ship almost flew itself, and he found the hatch that led down into its belly, throwing it open with one foot. He pulled the bottle of acid out, staring at its waxy surface. He uncorked it and waited.

When the great capacitor that lay there blew up, it wouldn't do to have the Enigma too low!

The needle went up, indicating twenty miles of height, and he pushed it on, until it crowded the pin at twenty-five, and the jets began to lose apparent power. There he leveled off, set her into a tight circle, and gently dropped the bottle of acid down into the inside, where it would begin eating through the tough metal and tougher insulation, to short-circuit unimaginable power. His foot snapped the hatch back, before any of the fumes could get into the cabin.

For a second longer, he let the plane circle, before he readied for the controls, to head her out towards the ocean.

"Hands up, Mike!"

The voice broke on the words, with the fear riding thickly on them. And Mike's hands shot up as he turned to see Enright crawling out from the rear, his stark white face dirty and strained. The man was shaking, and the gun wavering as it pointed at Mike—the one thing a man who has seen guns in action will always fear.

"You damned fool," Mike said, trying to keep his voice level. "Do you realize you're sentencing yourself to death?"

"They won't catch me." Enright had pulled himself up now, bracing himself to withstand the strain of pressure created by the turning of the ship, now much slower and looser than before, but still too much for comfort outside the field of the pseudo-transformer. Mike realized suddenly that the man had probably been blacked out and had seen none of his work with the acid.

"They won't catch me," Enright said again. "And this time, they'll be satisfied. They'll have to be satisfied. My boys are prisoners of Pan-Asia, Mike Dane! They have been for three years."

Horror and disgust hit at Mike as he stared at the half hysterical man. "You!"

"Me." Enright settled into the other seat, and pulled the control stick over to his side, kicking it around on its frame without letting the gun drop from its aim at Mike. "Call me a spy, Mike. Go ahead. You can't say anything I haven't said. When I sent them the athodyd plans—and the robot schematics —when I promised them this. But they're winning, anyhow! It doesn't make any difference. It just ends the war sooner, so less get killed. And my boys won't be tortured. I got an ear once, a single ear!"

"So you want to turn the world over to such people," Mike said, and now he was glad that the acid was eating away down there. "You—and Molly!"

Enright looked at him with an unchanged, taut stare. "Molly? No, I couldn't find what she was doing. They wanted that, too—they wanted it pretty badly. But this will satisfy them. It has to satisfy them. They'll free my boys, and the war will be over. Because they think they can crack the secret there. But you're going back, Mike. I don't want you like my boys!"

He reached forward, to press a control on the panel, and then stopped. "You should have a parachute. I—" He gulped, and his finger was shaking on the trigger. Then he caught himself. "But it's better than torture, Mike. And I can't shoot you. Damn it, I can't!"

The finger hit the panel, as if he'd spent hours studying it in the handbook or in their checks of the real thing.

The Enigma stopped with a violent braking from her jets that threatened to buckle her back on herself. The airspeed indicator jerked to a stop against the zero pin And suddenly, the seat under Mike seemed to explode outwards through a panel that snapped open and shut behind him. He'd been ejected into the air, twenty miles above the Earth without a parachute.

Now the Enigma flashed into motion again, and Mike jerked the oxygen mask up against his face. His body ached and burned inside itself at the change in pressure, even through the heavy webbing of the high-altitude suit that could only partially equalize things. Instinctively, he pulled up the zippers that sealed it, and it flooded with oxygen, ending the attack of bends before they could reach a full start. The pressure held his arms and legs out rigidly, but the feeling now was one of lightness and almost peace as he went into free fall toward the ground below.

The Enigma had turned and was heading westward at full speed, a little erratically, as Enright probably fumbled while learning to handle it. But it was soon lost to sight. Mike wondered how far he would get before the acid did its work—perhaps he'd reach his goal, though that seemed doubtful. But he had no way of knowing.

Surprisingly, he was falling straight toward the little field. The air began to thicken, slowing his fall and setting up a shriek in his ears, while the suit became warm. Then it settled back. There was almost no wind, though he was surprised to find that it was raining gently here. It was too bad that he'd probably smash into the private little field. A man should keep his dying quiet, not make a mess of it where others would see…

The ground touched his feet! The long fall was over! And he felt nothing; no shock, no sudden impact, and no instant death he had expected.

The purpose of the pseudo-transformer was plain now. Anti-inertia! Some field that had no effect on gravity or acceleration up to the normal limit, but stubbornly refused to admit that mass had inertia or momentum beyond that normal. No wonder they hadn't detected an energy output.

It was hissing above him, probably hot. The cover on it had been removed and never replaced, and the rain was sizzling softly against it. He shucked it off, along with his heavy suit, and began kicking a hole into the damp earth to bury it, where even that trace of the Enigma would be gone, until its normal iron core could rust away in the ground.

It was sizzling worse as he threw the last wet earth over it, but he paid no attention to that. Finished, he started back toward the ruined laboratory, his mind dulled, and without any purpose.

Then he head a faint voice, and jerked erect, almost letting his prosthetic leg double under him.

"Mike! Somebody! Hey!"

It was his father's voice.

Mike opened his mouth to answer. But there was no time. From the place where he had buried the gadget, there was a sudden eruption of steam as the wetness found some vital spot. Then the whole field seemed to explode. Mike caught a brief second of the glare, before something hit him with a giant's hand, and he was suddenly unconscious.

Mike had vague memories of apparent clarity, and of the face of his father and that of Molly over him. But when he finally came out of the last of the drugs and the delirium, ten days had gone by, and only Custer was beside him. He sat up, or tried to, but the other shook his head.

"You're all right, Mike. You had a concussion that was a honey, and you lost a leg—but it was the prosthetic, not your good one, so I guess that won't matter. Here." Custer threw a small box on the bed, close to Mike's weak fingers.

"Dad?" Mike asked, and was surprised at how rusty his voice felt.

"So you heard him?" Custer grinned, though there was a strange shadow on his eyes. "He came back, unharmed—with no memory of any time elapsing, but he was stuck under a section of the control panel. A good thing we had the place cleared this time. He thinks nothing happened, except that the time-dredge exploded. We took him to the hospital with you, and managed to convince him that the shock had messed up his memory. He'll never know about the Enigma."

It was probably quite possible, Mike realized. There had been no more than fifty men who knew the whole story, and none of them would talk.

"Better open the box, Mike," Custer suggested, and then bent down to do it for him. There was a medal there, and two gold stars pinned to the velvet back.

"For what?" he wanted to know. "For stealing the Enigma and losing it. Or don't they know about that?"

"They know—between your raving and the black light camera and pickup we had in the laboratory to keep tabs on the Enigma, we have the whole story." Custer reached into his pocket and brought out a heavily folded newspaper clipping. .

Mike caught the headline, and gasped, skimming down through the story. Poor Enright! He'd apparently reached his goal safely, and the Enigma must have been transferred directly to the long sought secret production plant of Pan Asia. But they'd probably tortured him and the two boys, after the results. It seemed that half of the Gobi desert had erupted. The Enigma had finally blown—and it must have touched off a whole collection of hydrogen bombs with it. Pan-Asia now had exactly no secret production works, and no inhabitants for a hundred miles around.

* * *

"But that isn't why the stars," Custer said. "Those are for the real reason we're finally winning the war. Project Swipe is paying off. They took that idea of yours seriously."

"What idea?"

"Spraying. We've been running planes over Pan-Asian territory with the metal glue, and spraying from our top altitude. It's heavy enough to settle in the size drops we use. Next day, we go over with the polymerizer, and the stuff freezes. There probably isn't a machine in the whole European conquered territory that will work. And before they can get the secret, they'll be begging for peace in any terms. We're getting feelers already. Incidentally. your father thinks the can of glue was all that was left from his swipe after the machine exploded, but he seems to be satisfied to let time alone. One success is enough, I guess. He's got a couple of stars, too, now. If you get married—and it's about time—and Molly gets the rating she deserves, you're going to be quite a family."

"Molly!"

"Molly," Custer said. "She found what you'd left in apartment, Mike. That's why she wanted me here when you woke up—so you wouldn't get too excited when you saw her. It wasn't a piece from the Enigma, Mike. It's out in normal top secret now, and the Dane Company even has part of a contract on it. Mike, Molly's found how to develop magnetic current!"

Mike looked up at the ceiling, feeling the same shadow creep into his eyes that lay in Custer's. Molly had come back to her place in his mind, bringing warmth and content with her. But something else was there—a realization of the road they were headed down. Today the impossible magnetic current. Tomorrow, counter-inertia. Someday, capacitors that had no limit. It was the opening wedge to a tomorrow where science played god while man went on in the same old pattern of hate and death. And the future wasn't so far, after all.

Custer looked down at Mike with understanding, and dropped a hand onto Mike's shoulder. "Get well soon, boy. We're going to need you. I'll send Bruce and Molly in, in a minute or two."

Mike watched him go. From beyond the door, he heard the warm voice of Molly and the deeper warmth of his father's speech. In a minute, they'd be here, and he'd forget all the other for a while. But not for long. With the future that was coming, there was no time to waste.

Maybe they couldn't eliminate war. But as least they could be ready for it. That, apparently, was all the future could teach them, but it would be enough.

Anything

Until Anything came to Carlsburg, I thought I knew the town like the back of my hand. A small town paper is built on knowledge of the people it serves, rather than news value, and I'd been editing the weekly *Union Leader*, unofficially known as the *Onion*, for eight years. But the rumors I heard of the Man in Brown refused to fit into the picture.

In common with most small farming communities where the population is falling instead of rising, gossip was the leading rival of the newspaper; and in Carlsburg, it had been raised to a high art. From Aunt Mabel's dizzy spells to Uncle Tod's rheumatism, everybody's business was common property, and a stranger should have been dissected and analyzed within three days.

The Man in Brown wasn't. There were rumors, of course, but they all boiled down to practically nothing. Apparently, he'd first been seen about a week before, looking for work, and vouchsafing no information about himself. For some reason, nobody had thought to ask him who he was or where he came from—which was the mystery of the affair.

Jim Thompson dropped into the *Union Leader*'s office one morning, to talk about some advertising and to relay his wife's orders. Jim was the owner of the local lumberyard and hardware store, and one of the best advertisers I had, even if he did wear himself bald trying to save pennies.

"Now, Luke," he told me, "it's up to you to find out about this here Brown Man, and Molly don't want any nonsense. That's what you're supposed to be doing, running a newspaper like you are. Molly swears she'll drop her 'scription and get the club to do the same, if you don't find out about him. He's been in town over a week now, ain't he?"

"Uh-huh." Molly ran the Carlsburg Culture Club, and I'd had trouble with her before. "I've been trying to get the facts, Jim, but the lack of information is stupendous. Anyhow, I heard yesterday that your wife has already met the fellow, which is more than I've been able to do. What'd she say about him?"

"He come to the door asking for work, seems like; said he didn't want no pay. Now I ask you, don't that sound half-cracked?" Thompson reached over for my tobacco and filled his pipe, fishing around for a match until I handed him one. "Molly give him the mower and told him to cut the lawn, which he did right smart and proper. Seems like she no more'n stepped back inside when the job was done. So she give him the bowl of bread and milk he wanted—that's all he'd take—and away he went."

It was the same story with minor variations that I'd heard all week; he was continually searching for odd jobs, and taking his pay in bread and milk, or a place to sleep for the night. "But didn't she ask him where he was from and what he intended doing?"

"That's the funny part of it all. You know how Molly is?" Jim grinned and I nodded. Even in Carlsburg, Molly's nose for scandal enjoyed a large reputation. "Somehow she never got around to asking him. They kinda talked about the weather and then begonias, but all the questions just slipped plumb out of Molly's mind. Matter of fact, she didn't even get his name."

Thompson took out his fountain pen and turned to the bench where I kept the ink, but stopped halfway. "Speak of the devil," he muttered, pointing across the street. "Here he comes now, headed right this way. Now see what you can make of him."

The man crossing the street was ordinary enough in appearance, a little over average height, with a weathered brown hat and wrinkled brown suit hanging loosely on him. His very lack of distinction made description impossible, except for the easy humor of the smile he was wearing. With a loose springy stride, he came up the steps and leaned against the door facing me.

"Good morning, gentlemen. You're Luke Short, the editor here, I believe?" The voice was soft and casual. "I'd like to run an advertisement in the paper if you'll let me pay in work. I haven't much use for money."

"Know anything about typesetting?" I asked. My regular one-man staff had been sick, and I needed a man to replace him in the worst way. "If you do, I'll run your item and pay regular wages."

He sauntered in. "Anything. I'm sort of an all-around worker, from baby-minding to house building. Only I don't work for money; just give me a place to stay and a couple of meals a day, and we'll call it square. That's what I wanted to say in the ad. You want the setting done now?"

"This afternoon." I pulled out a galley proof and held it out as a rough test; most people, I've found, don't know six-point from great primer. "What size type is this?"

"Pica, or twelve-point on the caption; the rest's brevier, or eight-point, upper and lower case. I told you I did anything—use a stick or linotype, run a job press, make cuts, write copy—anything. What'll I do this morning and where'll I sleep?"

Jim Thompson had finally succeeded in filling his pen and was sticking a few blotters and envelopes in his pocket. He piped up. "You say you do building work?"

"Anything." The Man in Brown laid peculiar stress on the word whenever he used it.

"Well, I'm putting a new lumber shed up at the yard, and we're a mite shorthanded." The truth of that matter was that Jim had lost his workers because they asked more than he was willing to pay, and because his fat wife tried to run their private lives. "If you want work so bad, you can lay asbestos shingles, whenever Luke don't want you. Sure you don't want money? Okay, there's a cot in the back office where you can sleep. That okay?"

"Perfectly. And you'll find me a rapid worker, I'm sure."

They were almost out of range before I remembered enough to shout after him. "Hey, you! What'll I call you?"

He grinned back over his shoulder. "Anything," he answered, and it struck me as being appropriate, at that.

I had to cover the Volunteer Fire Department's proposed drive for money that noon, and it wasn't until I neared my office that I remembered Anything. I also remembered that the old secondhand linotype was out of order as usual, and needed a new cam installed before it could be used. Well, the paper had gone to bed late often enough before, so there was no use worrying.

Anything had his feet cocked up on the desk when I came in, and a pile of galley sheets lay beside him. "Setting's all done," he said. "Want me to make it up while you finish that story you've been out on?"

I looked at my watch and calculated the time needed to set the work I'd left for him. It didn't work out right, and a linotype refuses to be hurried, but there was no disputing the galley sheets; the work was done. "What about the linotype?"

"Oh, I fixed that. Had a little trouble finding whether you had a new cam, but my nose led me to it. By the way, your former helper called in to say the doctor says no more work for him. I stuck a 'faithful service' notice in the editorial column."

"I suppose you finished laying Thompson's shingles this morning, in your spare time?"

The sarcasm didn't register. "I finished about eleven-thirty—he only had eight thousand to lay. I spent my spare time over at the garage helping Sam White tear out and overhaul a tractor engine. How about that makeup?"

I gave up. "Okay, just as soon as I proofread these sheets."

"No need. They're all perfect now. I found a few broken-face type when

I ran off the proofs, and fixed that up." There was no hint of boasting, and his voice was casual; but I'd punched ETAOIN SHRDLU myself, so I had no faith in perfect typesetting. I went over the proofs carefully—and there were no errors!

We put the paper to bed ahead of schedule for the first time in a year, and I took Anything home with me to the bungalow I was renting on the edge of town. For the benefit of subscribers, he'd written a quarter column on himself that gave no information but would fool the readers into thinking they knew all about him. Anything was a master of vague phrasing.

"Look here, Anything," I opened up on him as he began cooking the supper, at his own insistence. "You might fool the others with that story you wrote, but just what is the truth? All you said was that you'd come from somewhere, done something, were somebody, and meant to stay here as long as you felt like it."

He grinned and began dishing out the meal. "At least it wasn't a lie, Luke. You like catsup with your meat?"

"I take meat straight. Better try some yourself."

"Bread and milk's all that agrees with my stomach. Let's say I'm on a diet. How long you been running the *Onion*?"

"About eight years. Um, that's good!" Anything was more chef than cook, and I appreciated a meal that wasn't thrown together. "I've been trying to get on the regular papers in Chicago or Minneapolis, but there's not much hope. I'd have to quit here and take pot-luck in the city; they don't think much of small-town editors."

He finished his frugal meal and accepted a cigarette. "You're a pretty good man, Luke; maybe some paper'll take you yet. In the meantime, you might do worse than the *Onion*. Thanks, I will take a piece of cheese, at that. You know, I think I'll like it here."

"Expect to stay long?"

"Maybe. It's sort of hard to say, the way things go. I had a pretty fair job on a farm upstate, but the farmer was Scotch."

I hoped for more information, but he gathered up the dishes and carried them out to the sink in silence, refusing my help. "Thanks, but I can do them faster alone. I suppose I can't blame people for suspecting me, at that. Anyone who works for room and board nowadays is supposed to be crazy; but I happen to have a dislike for money. The Scotchman got the idea I was a brownie."

The word should have meant something to me, but not very much. I was sure it had something to do with superstition, though; something about little men who went around doing things for people until somebody tried to pay them, or they were driven away.

"Sort of an elf?" I hazarded.

"Sort of; you might call them Scotch elves. They tended cows or children, cleaned up the house of a woman who was sick, and made themselves useful in any way they could, though hardly anyone ever saw them work. Mostly they worked at nights, and all they wanted was a cranny in a barn where they could sleep and a bowl of food left for them once or twice a day. If anyone tried to force other payment on them, they had to leave."

"That doesn't sound like the sort of person a farmer should object to."

"Well, there's more to the superstition than that. It seems that they could do ill as well as good. Make the milk turn sour, cause a cow to go dry, and the like. Anytime they were displeased, it was bad business. Sometimes the people got together and drove them away, and that was always the wrong thing to do. So when I come around dressed in brown and working for their wages, a few people get worried."

I could see where he'd worry some people, but more from curiosity than fear. "But the brownies, if I remember right, were supposed to be short little fellows. And I never read about their smoking or doing work in the newspaper line."

"Oh, I'm not suggesting I am one." He grinned with a hint of puckish amusement. "That sort of superstition has pretty well died out, anyway, and sensible people—like us—know there couldn't be such things. Still, if there were, I imagine they'd be modernized by now. They'd have to be more human looking to mix with men, and they'd have to adapt themselves to city life, perhaps. Of course, some of the old rules might still apply."

I wondered whether he was telling me all that in the hope of discouraging further questions, or whether he had some other purpose in mind. But that was his business. "Maybe they would change, if there were such things," I agreed. "How about staying here tonight? That cot of Thompson's won't be overly comfortable."

"It'll be all right. Anyhow, Thompson's putting me to work making general repairs tomorrow morning, so I'll be up early. See you in the after noon, Luke."

As he disappeared toward the yard, I had a crazy idea that he'd do more than sleep during the night. Maybe it was what he'd been saying that caused it.

Jim Thompson came in the next morning with a smile that was so genuine it had to mean money for him. "That Anything's what I call a worker," he greeted me. "Does more work than any six men I ever had, and I don't have to stand watch over him, neither. Just goes off by himself and first thing I know, he's back asking for more."

"He's the best helper I ever had," I agreed. "How'd your wife like the article I ran on him in this week's paper?"

"Oh, fine, fine. 'Bout time you got it out, too. She says it's just what she wanted to know."

I'd had other compliments on the item, too. Anything had succeeded beautifully in telling everybody what they wanted to know without actually telling a thing; but I didn't explain that to Jim.

He drew some wrinkled sheets out of his pocket, covered with what he called writing, and I knew there was more advertising to be had from him. "Got a little job for you, Luke. Want you to run some handbills for me, like it says here."

"Which is—"

"When you ever gonna learn to read?" He snorted at that for the hundredth time. "Okay, just say I'm willing to contract for repairs around town to cost only the price of the lumber and hardware. I'll furnish the labor free for this week to anyone wanting work of that kind done. Town sorta needs a lot of repairs, I guess, and it's a good thing for 'em."

When Jim offered free labor, it meant it was free—especially to Jim. "You'll get your value out of your cot out of Anything, won't you?" I asked.

I had to admit that Anything was a good worker. When I'd opened the office that morning, I'd found an envelope inside the door with half a dozen news items in it; as I'd guessed, Anything hadn't wasted the night. "Sam White's figuring on cutting in on it, too. He called up this morning wanting Anything to help with a couple of cars when we're not using him."

"Sam's a chiseler, always has been." He rounded up a scratch pad and eraser and pocketed them. "You make him fork over for Anything's board, or you'll be a fool. By the way, you hear about Olsen's sick horse?"

"No. The vet finally succeeded in curing it?"

"Vet didn't have a thing to do with it, though he claims he done it all. Olsen woke up this morning and there the horse was, raring to go." Thompson filled his pipe and picked up a couple of red pencils. "You get the handbills out right away, Luke. I'm expecting to sell a smart bit of lumber this week." Jim sold more than a smart bit. By the time the week was almost up, there wasn't a house in town that didn't have some of Anything's work in it, and several houses were practically made over. Where he found time for the work was a mystery that puzzled everyone except Thompson.

Anything worked when people were away from home, and there were rumors that he had a staff of assistants, but no one ever saw them. Molly Thompson had started that idea and the rumor that Anything was a millionaire come to town to rebuild it secretly; somebody else added that he was planning on opening a factory there, which explained his interest in Carlsburg. There were other contradictory rumors, too, but that was the normal course of events in the town.

All I knew was that Anything could do more newspaper work in part of an afternoon than any other man could turn out in a week, and better work, at that. If he stayed in town long enough, paid subscriptions should be doubled at the end of the year. Sam White felt the same about his garage business.

And then the Carlsburg Culture Club held its monthly meeting, and the rumors that had been drifting around were focused in one small group. As a clearinghouse for scandal, the Culture Club acted with an efficiency that approached absolute. But since it was purely for women, I had to wait for the results of the meeting until the sound and fury were over and Molly Thompson brought in the minutes for publication.

She usually came in about nine in the morning, but this time she was late. It was nearly ten when Anything opened the door and walked in, and I was still waiting.

"Good morning, Luke," he said. "Is that bed over at your place still open to me?"

I nodded. "Sure is, Anything. What's the matter with the cot and why aren't you working for Jim this morning?"

"Carlsburg Culture Club," he answered. But his grin was a little sour, and he sat back in the chair without offering to do anything around the place. "Molly'll be calling you up in a couple of minutes, I guess, and you'll hear all the dirt then. Got a cigarette, Luke?"

When Anything asked for something, it was news good for two-inch type, purple ink and all. I handed him the cigarette and reached over to the phone that was beginning to ring. "Carlsburg *Union Leader*, editor speaking."

Molly's shrill voice tapped in over the wire, syllables spilling all over each other. "Don't you 'editor' me, Luke Short; I know your voice. You want them minutes, or don't you?"

"Of course I do, Mrs. Thompson. People always want to know what happened at the Culture Club." Personally, I doubted whether ten people, club members excepted, cared enough to know they were printed; I'd always begrudged the ink that put them on paper.

"You ain't fooling me with that soft soap. But you do want our 'scriptions, don't you? There's over forty of us, and we can make a lot of other people stop 'scribing, too. You want our 'scriptions?"

The line was old; I usually heard it six times a year, and in eight years, the words hadn't changed. "Now, Mrs. Thompson, you know I want your subscriptions. What can I do for you this time?"

"Humph! Well, you better want 'em." She stopped for a dramatic pause and drew in her breath for a properly impressive explosion. "Then you get rid of that Anything, Luke Short! You hear me, you get him outta there today. You 'n' that husband of mine, mixing up with him like you had a bargain, just 'cause you're too stingy to hire honest workers. I'll tell you, I put a bug in Jim's ear, and he won't try that again. And that Anything—a-telling me he was a millionaire trying to build up the town! Humph!"

I tried to calm her down and be patient. "Now, Mrs. Thompson, I'm sure you'll remember he never said that. I knew, of course, that several rumors were going around, but I can assure you he was responsible for none of them."

"Like fun he wasn't. Every member of the club had a different story, and every one of them heard it *personal* from him. They told me so themselves. Wasn't no two alike!" Which was undoubtedly true; rumors in Carlsburg always were heard "personal" from the person concerned, according to reports. "And look what he done!"

Anything had come over and had his ear within a few inches of the receiver—as near as his eardrums could stand. He was grinning. Molly Thompson went on with a truly religious zeal.

"Going around doing all that work. It don't fool *me*. He had a purpose, and you be sure it wasn't for nobody's good. Besides, look at Olsen's horse. And Turner's boy that got bit by a hyderphoby dog and never even felt it. And look at them gardens where nobody ever finds any weeds or quack grass anymore. Fanny Forbes saw him working in her garden one night. He's up to everything funny that's going on in this town, doing free work just to fool you men into thinking he's your friend. It's a good thing us women keep our eyes open, or you'd all wake up with your throats cut some morning."

I remember another stranger who'd come to town before and shut himself up in a house, hardly coming out. The Culture Club had decided he was a famous swindler and tried to instigate tar-and-feather proceedings.

They almost succeeded, too, when it was learned he was a writer trying to fulfill a contract for a book. Everything that was mysterious was evil to the club.

But I still tried to keep the peace. "I can't see any wrong in what has been done. He merely told us he could do anything, and kept his word. Surely that's nothing against the man."

"Anything! I'd like to see a person who could do anything at all. If I couldn't name a hundred things nobody could do, I'd eat my shoes. And him saying he could do anything!"

"So far, he's done what he claimed, Mrs. Thompson, and I'm not firing him for that."

She choked on it, and then snickered in greasy nastiness. "I'll just show you whether he can do anything. If he'll do just what I want him to, you keep him and I'll not say another word. If he don't, you fire him. That a bet?"

Anything nodded, but I didn't like the sound of it. "Lord knows what she's got in mind," I warned him. He nodded again, emphatically, and there was little humor in the smile.

"It's a bet. You tell him what you want," I answered, handing Anything the phone.

She must have lowered her voice, because I couldn't hear what she said next. But Anything's smile grew sharp and pointed, and there was something on his face I'd never seen before, and didn't want to see again. His usual soft voice was low and crisp as he finally spoke into the instrument.

"As you wish, Mrs. Thompson. It's already done."

There was a sudden shriek over the phone, and he put the receiver buck on its hook. "Come on, Luke," he said. "I'm afraid I got you into trouble that time, and I'm sorry about it. Let's go home and see what happens."

Well, the paper was all made up, ready to be turned out the next day, and there wasn't much left to do. During the week I'd learned to respect Anything's judgment, and I had a hunch that this was one of the times to follow his advice. In five minutes, the shop was closed, the curtains down, and we were heading back to my bungalow.

"You won't believe it, Luke, so don't ask questions," was all he would tell me. "She asked something she thought impossible, and I did it. Matter of fact, you ought to kick me out and not be seen with me again."

That shriek over the telephone had suggested the same; but, hell, I liked the fellow. "I'll stick," I told him. "And when you get ready to talk, I'll listen. How about a little work in the garden this afternoon?"

We didn't do much work, and at Anything's suggestion, we made an early supper of it, leaving the dishes unwashed and sitting around smoking. He seemed to be waiting for something, or listening to something.

"You got any good friends in town, Luke?" he asked finally. "I mean, somebody you can really depend on in a pinch?"

"There's Sam White. He'd lend me his last clean shirt. And he's a pretty good friend of yours, if I'm not mistaken."

"He seemed pretty square. You and he were the only ones who treated me like a white man." Anything stood up and began pacing around uneasily, going out to the door and back. "Why doesn't that messenger come?"

"What messenger?"

"Special delivery letter for you. Don't ask me how I know, either." He was standing on the porch, staring down the street. "Ah, there he is now. Go out and sign for it, Luke."

"Special delivery for Lucian Short," the man said. He avoided my eyes, though I'd known him for years, seized the signed book, and scurried back to the car. I grunted and went back inside.

The letter was short:

> Your letter requesting a chance to work with us has come to my attention. At present, we are looking for a man to fill the position of City Editor, soon to be vacated. We have checked your references and examined your previous work, and believe you are particularly qualified for this position. Please report at once.

It was signed by the managing editor of the Chicago *Daily Blade*, a paper I'd been trying to get on for years; but I hadn't tried for the City Desk.

I grunted, holding it out for Anything's inspection. "Dammit, they don't hire men that way—not for jobs like that on a Chicago paper."

He chuckled. "It seems they did. Maybe that will solve the problem. You'll be leaving on the seven-ten bus, I reckon. Better answer the phone, Luke, while I pack up your things. It's been ringing a couple of minutes now."

With clumsy hands, I stuffed the envelope into my pocket and made a dash for the phone, buzzing its head off. Sam White's voice answered.

"Luke, for the love of Pete, is Anything there?"

"He is."

"Well, get him out of town! Get out of town yourself until this blows over. You're mixed up with him, and they're crazy enough to do any fool thing."

"What's up?" I'd expected something, and the expectation had been growing all afternoon, but nothing that justified the frantic urge in Sam's voice.

"The town's gone gaga, Luke! Absolutely nuts! Molly Thompson, the two Elkridge sisters, the whole damned Culture Club and some besides, have been stirring up people since before noon. Nobody's in his right mind. They're talking about a lynching party!"

That was strong. "Lynching party? You're drunk, Sam. We haven't killed anybody."

"Worse than that. They've gone back to the Middle Ages, I'll swear they have. I don't know nor care how he did it, but Anything's gone too far for them. They're talking about witchcraft and his either being Satan or a substitute for him. I thought this was a civilized town, but it's not. They're all drunk on superstition and fear."

"Sam, in heaven's name, slow down and make sense!" His words were jumbled together until I could hardly understand him. "What happened?"

Sam caught his breath and slowed down a little. "Seems Anything hexed Molly and the Elkridges. You know how fat they were? Well, they're the thinnest, scrawniest women in town now. Molly doesn't weigh over eighty pounds! You've got to leave town before they really get stirred up. You can still make it, but give them another hour, and hell's gonna pop! Get out, Luke!"

So that was what the screech over the phone had meant. At heart, I knew, people hadn't changed much in the last thousand years, and I could imagine what was going on. "Okay, Sam, and thanks," I said cutting off his expostulations. "I just got a job in Chicago, and I'm going there. *Daily Blade*."

Relief was heavy in his voice. "That's fine, Luke. I'll see you in Chicago. My brother has a garage there, and he wants me to join him. Just got a special delivery from him. After tonight, I don't want another thing to do with this crazy bunch. Make it as quick as you can."

"I'm leaving now." Anything had just come down with the bags. The furniture was furnished with the house, and I hadn't acquired much except a few books. "See you in Chicago."

The line went dead, and I grabbed for a bag. "We're leaving, Anything. Sam says the town's out for blood."

He nodded and shouldered the two heaviest bags. "I kind of thought that might happen. But when she asked me to make her thin, I couldn't resist the opportunity. Hope you're not mad?"

I wasn't. The whole thing struck me as funny—if we got out all right. The bus station, really only a covered platform, was on the other side of town, and I'd have to catch it to Winona and transfer to a Chicago train there. No train would pass through Carlsburg before ten o'clock. But the whole main street lay between my house and the bus stop.

We walked along in silence. There were people ahead, crowded into little groups, talking in low voices with excited gestures. As they saw us coming, they drew back and dispersed quickly. For a half block on each side of us, the street was deserted, but they reformed their groups after we had passed. Watching them do that, I quickened my steps, but Anything pulled me back.

"Take it easy," he urged. "They haven't reached the boiling point, but they're pretty close to it. If we take our time, we'll make it, but let them think we're running from them, or afraid of them, and they'll be on us in a jiffy."

It made sense, and I calmed down, but cold shocks kept running up and down my backbone. Even the dogs around us seemed to slink with their tails between their legs. When a whole town turns on a man in one day, it isn't the pleasantest thing in the world.

Anything grinned easily, and his voice was mocking. "Somehow, Luke, I don't think people will like living here much anymore. The town seems sort of dingy and dinky, doesn't it?"

I hadn't noticed, but now I did. Up ahead, things were still looking reasonably well kept and attractive, but as we drew nearer, I noticed that the paint seemed dirty and about to scale off, the buildings seemed about to crumble in, and there was an air of gloom and sickness about the town. Behind us it was worse. There was no real difference that I could see, but the change was there. No, people weren't going to enjoy living in Carlsburg.

We came up to Sam White's garage, now closed for the night, but there seemed to be nothing wrong with the place. Anything nodded. "Cheerful here, isn't it? Well, each town has its own bright spots. And there's your office. Own any of the paper, Luke?"

I shook my head and noticed the same desolation fall on the *Union Leader* office. Even the people on the street behind seemed different. Before, they had been ordinary people, but now they looked older, more frustrated, like ghosts come back to haunt a place after its use was done. The dogs were howling dismally, and I could see none on the street now.

It was a relief to see the bus stop come into view and then feel its platform under my feet. It lacked two minutes of being time for the bus, but topping a hill in the distance, I could make out the amber glow of its lights in the growing dusk.

I turned to Anything. "Where are you going now?"

"Think I'll take that side road there and head west this time." It might have been a weekend trip for all the emotion he showed.

"Better come with me; maybe we can get you a job on the *Blade.* You're too good a printer and newspaperman for small towns."

He grinned. "I'll be all right, Luke, but thanks for all you've done. Someday, maybe, I'll look you up in Chicago."

I nodded and glanced off toward the approaching bus. "So long, Anything, and good luck." Then the question that had been bothering me for a week finally came to my lips. "Just what kind of a man are you, anyway?"

But as I turned back, there was no need of an answer. Where he had been, a little brown man, stocky and with a large head, was walking down the road. His clothes were fashioned like something out of a child's storybook, and he carried a little bag on a pole over his shoulder. As I looked, he turned his head back, and there was a purring chuckle in his answer.

"A brownie. So long, Luke."

Then the bus pulled up and cut off my view of the best newspaperman that ever hexed a town.

The Years Draw Nigh

Mars was harsh and old, worn with the footsteps of two races that had come and gone, leaving only scant traces behind. Even the wind was tired, and its thin waning was a monotonous mutter of memories from its eroded past.

Zeke Lerner stared out from the dust-covered observation port of the hastily-reconditioned little rocket, across the scarred runways and sand-filled pits for the star ships, toward the ruins of what had once been the great Star Station. His face was gray and dull as he watched a figure coming across the pitted sand of the field toward his ship.

He sighed softly, a faint sound in the tiny cabin, and his breath stirred the dust that lay everywhere. In four centuries, a man can learn not to think, but feelings and emotions survive. He was tired beyond any power of the rejuvenation treatments to remedy. His shoulders sagged slightly, confirming the age that the gray in his hair implied. But his eyes were older still as he swung about to open the inner lock of the ship.

Stendal was a middle-aged man, but some of the same age and fatigue lay on his face when he dropped his aspirator helmet and slumped limply into a seat. His plain uniform as Assistant Coordinator of Terra was covered with dirt and grime. He grinned faintly at Zeke and pulled a thermos of coffee out of its niche.

"So the *Thirty-Four* is coming back?" Zeke asked quietly.

He had no need of the other's nod, though. When they'd finally located him at the Rejuvenation Center and rushed him to the rocket field, he'd suspected. Only a matter of extreme urgency could interrupt a man's return to youth. The messengers had been uninformative, but he had been sure, once they told him Stendal was waiting on Mars. They must have been keeping it restricted to the top administrators. Zeke's eyes went back to the dirt on the man's uniform.

"Top secret," Stendal confirmed. "So hush hush that I came to do the janitor work here. Now it's all yours. The robots and I managed to get it into a reasonable facsimile of repaired condition. Oof! I could use a week's sleep, but I've got to get back earthside at once… Sorry to interrupt the rejuvenation, Zeke."

Zeke shrugged. Once, when the rejuvenation was new and men stood in line for days to keep their appointment, it might have mattered. Now there'd be a cancellation he could replace. Over fifteen percent of the population was refusing treatment—and some of the canceling men were those only reaching their first touch of age. Each year, less of the population seemed to find life worth renewing.

"How'd you find out she was coming?" he asked. "After all, she's fifty years overdue."

Stendal tossed the thermos into a disposal chute and reached for one of Zeke's cigarettes. "Centaurus automatic signal must still be working. Nigel, at the Bureau, got a series of pips showing something coming this way faster than light. That's the only ship we have out, so it must be her, or..."

He let it hang unfinished, but Zeke knew what he was thinking. It was either the *Thirty-Four* or another race coming with a ship that could exceed light speed. Sudden adrenalin shot through him, and he straightened. After all, the ship was long overdue. He wished the ship and the men no ill, but—

"No use getting up false hopes," Stendal cut into his thoughts. "The captain was a pretty determined sort, as I remember him. Maybe he had trouble. And I'll have trouble if I don't get back. I'll leave you a robot, in case anything needs more repairs. Think you can still run this setup, Zeke?"

Zeke snorted. He'd spent time enough at Marsport, first as head of communications, and finally as director of the whole Star Ship project, while they built the great ships and sent them out as fast as they could come off the ways. Forty ships during half a century, each costing over four billion dollars. And the *Thirty-Four* was the last one out. All the rest had come back to report failure in this final quest for new frontiers.

They buckled on their aspirator helmets and went out through the locks. Stendal waved curtly and headed toward his own rocket, calling three of the waiting robots with him and sending the fourth toward the broken ruin of the administration building. Zeke watched Stendal's rocket take off and disappear. Then he turned for a final look over the wrecked field.

Mars was already wiping out all traces of this second race that had come boiling out from Earth, bent for the stars. Marsport had been young and booming when Zeke had come there first, three and a half centuries ago. Two centuries later, when the star ships first began to come straggling back, and they shifted him to Earth to head General Traffic, the sand was just starting to creep over the outer buildings.

Those structures were gone now, vanished into the desert, with only this single building maintained after a fashion in faint hope the last ship would return. The frame shacks and hydroponic quonsets that had hidden the ancient Martian ruins were rotted long ago; there was only the hint of a foundation here and there to show they ever existed. In a century or so there would be no evidence that Mars had ever felt the marching feet of men, except for the scraps of the returned ships that might last a few millennia longer.

Zeke sighed again, and headed toward the building.

Then his eyes went to the horizon, where the piled stones and pitted pylon of beryl steel still stood, marking what had been the unknown and apparently unknowable race of Mars, dead perhaps ten million years before. Once that race must have spread its structures across the whole planet, but now there were only such traces as this, useless to even the archeologists. All the elaborate designs on them might have had significance once, but no man would ever decode them. There was no hint as to their nature, or where the race had vanished—or why.

He entered the lock of the building, with the robot dutifully at his heels, and surveyed it glumly. Only the one room, housing the great space-destroying ultrawave communicators, had been put in order. But most of the sand and dust was gone, and it was livable enough for a while. He checked to see that the communicator was working before walking over to the single window and staring out at the Martian ruins again.

Beside him, the robot stirred uneasily. "Orders?" it questioned.

Zeke turned back reluctantly from the window. "No orders, Ozin. We're on Mars, where men have given up dominion. You're as free as I am. Do what you like." Ozin stirred again, worn metal protesting at its lack of usefulness, its queer, almost intelligent mind trying to resolve the problem presented by Zeke's words. But even this final robot, the last model before men abandoned the idea of robots, could not handle that. "Orders?" it repeated.

Zeke gave up. "Take my ship up and house it behind the building, out of the way, then. After that, you can cut off until I call you."

The robot wasted no words in acknowledgement, but turned slowly and headed out, its metal body clumping along as woodenly as Zeke's mind was working. The lock hissed softly, and a trace of the stale, desiccated air of Mars came in. Then Ozin appeared around the arc of the wall, heading toward the rocket. Zeke watched it enter, saw the shiplock close, and shut his eyes at the deep blue flame of the exhaust from the unbaffled tubes.

Sand kicked up, spurting out and grating against the walls of the station wing, swishing against the pylon of the lost Martians. For a minute, dust hung in the air. But it settled back quickly now, to show an unchanged scene. Zeke heard the ship land again behind the building.

He reached automatically for a cigarette, wondering idly if the repaired building's aspirators would take even that much added load in their labor of making a decent atmosphere out of Mars' thin air. For a second, he fiddled with the ultrawave set. The signal was coming through from Earth, indicating that they were already quietly beaming it out to where the *Thirty-Four* could pick it up. It was the same dull, insipid news Zeke had heard for too many decades, though it might be interesting to men who had been gone from Earth for over two centuries. There was no other signal to indicate that they were within calling distance, however.

He went to the window again, to watch the slow sinking of the sun that was reddening a distant sandstorm, until it finally crept below the horizon. With an abruptness that was typical of the planet, darkness fell. The stars seemed to leap into the sky, with Earth standing out among them. He frowned at that, realizing that he was the only man who would be seeing it. All the others were home on the planet.

The skylight was filthy, but he found a battered bench that would stand his weight and began working the dust and grime from the glass. The stars were clearer through that. A few hundred years hadn't changed them noticeably, and he picked them out—hot points that barely flickered in the thin air of Mars. Jupiter was in view, and he knew where all the other useless planets should be, though he could not see them.

He grimaced faintly at that, remembering his life as a boy when men had dreamed that each new world might contain some rare treasure—or even intelligence to meet and compete with man. None had panned out, though. Mercury was too hot, Venus was a roiling dust-bowl under foul, poisonous layers of atmosphere, Mars worn beyond usefulness, and the other planets too cold and forbidding, except as possible stepping stones to the stars that lay farther out.

Chenery had found the trick to beat light speed when Zeke was still a callow thirty, and Marsport had sprung into life; the planet had made an ideal take-off point for ships which Earth could not permit in her own atmosphere because of the dangerous radiation of their exhausts.

There'd been Centaurus and Sirius, and the thousands of suns beyond, some with planets and some without. There had even been the high moment when a planet had been found and colonized, a mere thousand light-years away, before men had discovered that something in the star's radiation was eventually lethal to all Earth forms. But there had been no life beyond the Solar System—and nothing that even the most foolhardy could use as a reason for man's settlement.

It had proven to be a barren universe, except for Earth and the Mars of perhaps ten million years ago. Zeke looked at the ruins again, still faintly visible in the light that sliced out from his window. Whatever had built them had reached a civilization at least as high as man's. What had happened to them that had made a culture capable of such work come to a sudden and unmarked end?

A meaningless crackle came from the ultrawave set, and he moved to it, touching up its sensitivity. For a moment again, he hoped that it would respond with only gibberish that might mean another race coming down the long starlanes toward Earth, instead of the code he knew. But he choked off the wish, even before the speaker burped again. There was a sudden sound of code symbols a second later, followed by the thin, wavering words and voice at the limit of reception.

"Star Ship *Thirty-Four* coming in. Can you get us? *Thirty-Four* calling Marsport. Landing in two hours maximum. Clear field for full splash landing. Clear field for landing without tube shields. *Thirty-Four* calling Marsport—"

Zeke had the great bank of accumulators working through the transmitter, and the indicators showed that the big tubes were ready to throw their pulsed megawatts into subspace. He glanced at the bandpass and saw that it was at its maximum intelligibility level for the distance.

"Land Marsport, *Thirty-Four*, as you will. All clear. Repeat."

The voice came back, weaker. It wavered, broke into a squeal, and disappeared in a hash of static. Only blind luck had given them clear subspace long enough for a complete call. Zeke cut off the transmitter; there was no purpose in telling them that the field had been clear for decades. They'd find that soon enough.

Mars had still been a colony when they took off. It had remained one while six more of the great ships were built and sent out with orders to proceed to the limit of range before returning—or to return on significant discovery. Zeke had watched them all leave, filled with bright young volunteers, sure that they would be the ones to find a new race of intelligent life or a world that would be a paradise for men. Now the last one out was returning, and it was appropriate that he should meet the space-weary men who were coming home.

He tried to remember them, but there had been too many years and too many ships. On impulse, he knocked dust from the walls, scanning the names that had been scrawled there against regulations—and left because he had countermanded those regulations. Surprisingly, he found the one he was seeking. Hugh Miffen, captain of the *Thirty-Four*. Zeke remembered him now, a towheaded boy with a ramrod back and the hell-driving urge of divine inspiration in his eyes. And there had been "Preacher" Hook, who swore he was going to memorize the whole Bible in subspace. Only the two stood out now, over the long years.

Surely, if any group could have found a home for man or a companion intelligence, that group should have done it. *Something* must have happened during the fifty years they had been overdue. Their fuel would never have lasted, otherwise.

The speaker gobbled at him, finally, until he cut the power down. The wash of static could only mean that they were beginning the struggle out of subspace, knocking a hole for themselves in normal space and crawling painfully into it. It was taking the ship longer than it should, and Zeke began to worry. Then the blare of static decreased. He knew she was down under light speed.

The ship robot took his call this time, indicating that all the men aboard were fully occupied in the task of trimming her for normal flight. The signal was clear, however, and he could hear faint sounds of men's voices in the background. There was no undue worry in them, as best he could tell.

"Sealed beam," Zeke requested. It took more power to maintain a signal that could be handled on a beam with the ultrawave, but she was close enough now to risk it; it wouldn't do to have the message accidentally picked up by Earth until he knew what the results of the trip were. The robot acknowledged his order, and the queer, clipped effect of the sealing could be detected on the signal.

Zee grunted with satisfaction as he made his own adjustment. "Okay, this is Zeke Lerner, code responsibility 21-zy-18-obt-4-a. You can report."

"Digest of report," the robot began tonelessly. "Visited suns: 3248, examined planets: 2751. Checked suns on automatic spotting: 9472; checking planets and found barren on automatic spotting: 23,911. Maximum distance attained by direct route, one hundred ten thousand light years, forty-three ship years; arc of coverage…"

"Cut it out. Did you find inhabited world?"

The robot adjusted to the interruption slowly, humming into the microphone as evidence that it was still there. Zeke swore. Then a human voice suddenly took over, weary even through the distortion of the sealed beam.

"Lerner? You still on the spot?" It was a deep bass voice that could only belong to Hugh Miffen, in spite of the years that had roughened it. The ship had naturally carried rejuvenation equipment, but even the best treatment never wiped out all traces of time. "Sorry we had the robot on—it's about half shot, now. Anyhow, we're under light, and I'm free for a minute. Leaving out the statistics, we ran out too far and got short of fuel. We'd spotted two planets that might barely be habitable, so we backtracked and put down on one of them. It took us about thirty-five years to find and work fuel out of the ores. Then we went on a bit before we turned home."

Zeke's eyebrows had shot up, and he shook his head. He tried to picture what it would be like on some barely livable planet, scouting for ore, jury-rigging some kind of plant to refine it—with almost no equipment—and his old respect for Miffen when up another notch. That type of man seemed sadly lacking nowadays. But he made no comment on it; it could wait for more important things, and Miffen had begun to describe the two planets.

One was too far from its sun in an eccentric orbit, going from a brief summer into a bitter winter equal to three years of Earth time.

"Evidence of life anywhere?" he asked reluctantly, as the other finished. But the question had to be asked, Though the answer could be predicted almost certainly. Even over that distance, the possibility of other races to study might drive the scientists to set up an outpost, and with that as a basis, another world might be developed as a stepping stone to still further exploration.

Miffen's voice was hesitant as the answer came. "The world we were on—*Outpost*, we called it—had some ruins that could only come from intelligence. But there is nothing living there. Maybe it had been what we called it once…Damn!"

A yell had sounded thinly over the speaker. Miffen's steps clattered loudly, to fade out, and leave the ultrawave dead. With the ship braking down for a landing there was probably more than enough work for all the men. Zeke's hand lingered over the switch. Finally, he depressed it, cutting off power.

Ruins that showed intelligence, eighty thousand light years across the galaxy! In forty thousand explored worlds the star ships had touched, this was the first sign of even that much chance. It wasn't enough, of course, but…

Slowly Zeke's shoulders straightened and his figure came erect. They'd explored space to a distance of a hundred thousand light years on a bare chance, without any reason to hope. Out of all the previous reports, there had been only three habitable worlds, and no sign of life beyond the Solar System. Now a ship was returning with reports of two barely possible worlds and evidence that there was such life! An outpost—and somewhere beyond, perhaps, the planet where that life still existed.

With proper propaganda, with enough build-up, and with evidence that somewhere in the infinity of stars life and livability must exist, could man refuse to go on with his questing?

For a moment, he clutched at the hope. It had to be. One world was not enough for a race that had set its heart on the stars, had always found frontiers, and had geared its soul to an eternal drive toward something beyond. It could not be cooped up and fenced in without sickening in its own futility, as it was sickening even now—as he was sick within himself after four centuries of following blind alleys.

With only a little spark to fan the flames, men might be driven on. And perhaps only a few light years away from the end of their explorations—the arbitrary limits imposed by time and energy for the ships—there might be fellow races to stir the spark that was dying in mankind.

Then he grinned bitterly and looked out through the window, turning the single workable searchlight on the Martian ruins. Man had found evidence of other life in his own backyard, and it had carried him for centuries. But it was not enough to drive him onward forever. There was nothing on Outpost that couldn't be had—and no colony had lasted on Mars.

Zeke squinted his eyes as he studied the pylon again, noting the queer, twisted decorations on it. He had seen the report of the scientists, and they had finally given up the riddle. It would take more than this to drive men further outward. And Miffen's voice had sounded too doubtful.

But some of the hope remained faintly in him as he stood staring into the Martian night. It would have to wait until he heard more. Now it was only another mystery, like that of the lost race of Mars.

What had happened to them? They had known how to cast tungsten, and there was evidence that nuclear reactions had been used in tempering the pylons. That was high-level science. Where had it gone? There had apparently been no long period of high civilization, since the pylons all over the planet were about alike, with few advances in the later ones. There hadn't been time enough for the race to become decadent. Nor was there any evidence of war carried on by a race with advanced nuclear physics; there would have been enough signs of that. They couldn't have settled Earth, of course—it wouldn't have been suitable then. But they must have had starships. What had kept them from spreading outward—had even wasted them into nothingness in such a brief period of culture on their own planet?

His thoughts were interrupted by a beep from the speaker, and he switched on the automatic ultrawave because that would guide the ship down. Overhead, a thin whine thickened to a stuttering cough, the unhealthy sound of gasping, unshielded rockets that had been used too often and in too many futile landings. It was coming down well enough, though, half a mile away. Zeke watched it land while he was climbing into anti-radiation armor.

The ground was still smoking, but the counter showed the radiation low enough for a quick passage when he went out. He waited for the outer lock to open, then made a dash toward it, his breath reminding him that he was old and had not been rejuvenated. He crawled into the lock and stopped to catch himself before removing the armor, while the inner lock began to open.

Then he was facing four gaunt, weary men. His eyes darted back for the others of the thirty who had gone out, but Miffen was shaking his gray-bearded head, "Four of us, General. We had a few casualties. But..."

His arm swept out toward the field, now illuminated by the beams of the great ship, and his eyes fixed on the scene of the sand-filled pits and bits of building foundations that showed through the quartz of the entrance port.

Zeke shrugged and reached for his cigarettes. The sudden hunger in their eyes hit him then, reminding him of stores now depleted in all those long years. He passed the package around, careful not to notice the hands that shook as they pulled out the cylinders.

"We've had some casualties, too, you might say," he told Miffen. He lighted his own cigarette finally, and his shoulders lifted and dropped at the other's expression. "And I'm not a general now—not since Marsport was abandoned. I came out only because we were expecting you back... What about Outpost?"

"In my cabin I've got it on microfilm." Miffen swung about, waving the three crewmen off. For the first time, Zeke noticed that one of them had the flaming red hair that had always distinguished Preacher Hook.

He lifted an eyebrow and Hook nodded, pulling out a worn Bible and making a circle with his thumb and finger. "All memorized," he stated. But the grin on his face was uncertain, and the achievement no longer seemed to be important to him.

Zeke had forgotten the size of these star ships as they went up the handrails. The elevators were obviously not working. Miffen swung up the last and turned into a little cabin, kicking the door farther open. He dug into a worn chest and came out with a small package and a little viewer.

"I figured some things from what little we picked up of Earth's broadcast," he remarked emotionlessly as he threaded the film into the viewer. "But I didn't believe it. Not until I saw Marsport. I guess…well, this will give you an idea of Outpost. I explored all the suns around I could reach, but I never learned where the race originated."

Zeke adjusted the lenses carefully, seeing the unfamiliar two-dimensional flatness of non-stereo for the first time in centuries. It was awkward at first, but his eyes soon relearned the trick of fooling themselves.

There were several scenes, showing a sky of dull green, with grayish sand and something that looked like jumbled blocks of granite. As he stared, a pattern began to show itself. Something had been built there once, and by intelligence. Closer viewing showed that the stones had been shaped geometrically, under all their weathering.

He came to a list of statistics and slammed through it. Then he reached the final scene.

Miffen's voice suddenly sounded behind him, awkward and too tense. "What about the other ships?"

"They all got back—they're piled up beside the field, beyond the reach of your lights. No use to us now Thirty-nine hulks, and yours makes the fortieth—all we ever built." He turned back to the film, but again Miffen's voice interrupted him.

"All? I'd expected…That bad, eh?

"Worse. I suppose you're entitled to know what you've come back to. You'll see it soon enough, though—and better than I can tell you." Zeke clamped the viewer to his eye firmly, and turned to the light once more. "There was purpose when you left. Now that's all past tense."

"Yeah," Miffen let the word hang. He must have seen Zeke's sudden tenseness and realized there was no use putting off the inspection of the final scene on the film any longer. Zeke was staring at it, but he was unconscious of what his eyes saw, and the last of the hope in him was draining slowly away.

He stared up at Miffen, tapping the viewer. "You know what this is, of course. Or do you?"

Miffen shook his head. "I suspected. But I never paid much attention back here, and it's been a long time. I kept hoping I was crazy."

Zeke made no answer. He picked up the viewer and headed toward the control room, with Miffen following. Still silently, he pointed out through the viewports, across the leprous surface of Mars, toward the pitted beryl steel pylon that gleamed in the light from the Star Station. Then he put the viewer to his eyes again.

The sky was green instead of black, and the sand was gray where Mars was covered with red. But the scene was the same. A gleaming metal pylon rose from the rubble of ruined blocks, carrying the queer, twisted decorations that had been typical of all Martian structures. There was no question about what race had tried to colonize Outpost—and had failed.

Suddenly a work-gnarled hand took the viewer from him, and he turned to see Preacher Hook and the other men. They must have followed Miffen and himself into the control room. But it didn't matter. They must have suspected. And there was no surprise on their faces as they passed the viewer from one to another, comparing the scene with that outside.

Almost without feeling, Zeke picked up the ultrawave microphone and called the administration building, ordering the robot to bring his rocket down beside the big star ship. He adjusted the dials carefully and spoke terse, coded symbols into the instrument. A moment later, Stendal's voice answered him.

"I'm bringing the four survivors down in my ship," he reported in a voice that seemed completely detached from him. "Give us a secrecy blanket until we can report in full. And see if you can fill a few bathtubs with whiskey. We'll need it."

Stendal seemed to catch his breath and then sigh, but his words were level when he spoke. "So Pandora's box was just a fairy story, after all. Well, I never had many hopes. Okay, I'll get the liquor, Zeke. And about your rejuvenation—I'm getting a private installation here for you. If the others need it, we'll take care of all of you." Zeke looked up at the four men, and then out toward the pylon again –all that was left of a race that had searched the stars in its need to find new frontiers. It must have been a hardy race, since it had dared to set up a colony across all those innumerable parsecs of apace, without even the inspiration of other life. Then, when that colony had failed, the race had returned to the loneliness of its own little world, where the stars looked down grimly, no longer promising anything. Now Mars had been dead ten million years, and the pylon stood as the final tombstone on the world which had become a prison. The old puzzle of that race's end was solved.

The speaker was sputtering with Stendal's impatient questions, as Zeke and the men studied each other, but they gave no attention to it. Preacher Hook sighed, breaking the silence.

"Man goeth to his long home," he quoted softly. "And the mourners go about the streets; or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern; and the dust return to the earth as it was, and the spirit return unto God who gave it."

Zeke nodded and picked up the microphone.

"Just get the whiskey. We've decided to skip the rejuvenation."

He put the microphone back on its hook carefully and headed toward the handrails that led down, with he others behind him. Ozin had the rocket waiting, and they climbed in and strapped themselves down.

Then the rockets blasted, and the last five men beyond the Earth were heading home.

The Coppersmith

In the slanting rays of the morning sun, the figure trudging along the path seemed out of place so near the foothills of the Adirondacks. His scant three feet of stocky height was covered by a tattered jerkin of brown leather that fell to his knees, and above was a russet cap with turned-back brim and high, pointed crown. Below, the dusty sandals were tipped up at the toes and tied back to the ankles, and on each a little copper bell tinkled lightly as he walked.

Ellowan Coppersmith moved slowly under the weight of the bag he bore on his shoulders, combing out his beard with a stubby brown hand and humming in time with the jingling bells. It was early still and a whole day lay before him in which to work. After the long sleep, back in the hills where his people lay dormant, work would be good again.

The path came to an end where it joined a well-kept highway, and the elf eased the bag from his shoulder while he studied the signpost. There was little meaning for him in the cryptic marker that bore the cabalistic 30, but the arrow below indicated that Wells lay half a mile beyond. That must be the village he had spied from the path; a very nice little village, Ellowan judged, and not unprosperous. Work should be found in plenty there.

But first, the berries he had picked in the fields would refresh him after the long walk. His kindly brown eyes lighted with pleasure as he pulled them from his bag and sat back against the signpost. Surely even these few so late in the season were an omen of good fortune to come. The elf munched them slowly, savoring their wild sweetness gratefully.

When they were finished, he reached into his bag again and brought forth a handful of thin sticks, which he tossed on the ground and studied carefully. "Sixscore years in sleep," he muttered. "Eh, well, though the runes forecast the future but poorly, they seldom lie of the past. Sixscore years it must be."

He tossed the runes back into the bag and turned toward a growing noise that had been creeping up on him from behind. The source of the sound seemed to be a long, low vehicle that came sweeping up the road and flashed by him so rapidly that there was only time to catch a glimpse of the men inside.

"These men!" Ellowan picked up his bag and headed toward the village, shaking his head doubtfully. "Now they have engines inside their carriages, and strange engines at that, from the odor. Even the air of the highway must be polluted with the foul smell of machines. Next it's flying they'll be. Methinks 'twere best to go through the fields to the village."

He pulled out his clay pipe and sucked on it, but the flavor had dried out while he had lain sleeping, and the tobacco in his pouch had molded away. Well, there'd be tobacco in the village, and coppers to buy it with. He was humming again as he neared the town and studied its group of houses, among which the people were just beginning to stir. It would be best to go from house to house rather than disturb them by crying his services from the street. With an expectant smile on his weathered old face, Ellowan rapped lightly and waited for a response.

"Whatta you want?" The woman brushed back her stringy hair with one hand while holding the door firmly with the other, and her eyes were hard as she caught sight of the elf's bag. "We don't want no magazines. You're just wastin' your time!"

From the kitchen came the nauseating odor of scorching eggs, and the door was slammed shut before Ellowan could state his wants. Eh, well, a town without a shrew was a town without a house. A bad start and a good ending, perchance. But no one answered his second knock, and he drew no further response than faces pressed to the window at the third.

A young woman came to the next door, eyeing him curiously, but answering his smile. "Good morning," she said doubtfully, and the elf's hopes rose.

"A good morning to you, mistress. And have you pots to mend, pans or odds that you wish repaired?" It was good to speak the words again. "I'm a wonderful tinker, none better, mistress. Like new they'll be, and the better for the knack that I have and that which I bring in my bag."

"I'm sorry, but I haven't anything; I've just been married a few weeks." She smiled again, hesitantly. "If you're hungry, though…well, we don't usually feed men who come to the door, but I guess it'd be all right this time."

"No, mistress, but thank'ee. It's only honest labor I want." Ellowan heaved the bag up again and moved down the steps. The girl turned to go in, glancing back at him with a feeling of guilt that there was no work for the strange little fellow. On impulse, she called after him.

"Wait!" At her cry, he faced her again. "I just thought; Mother might have something for you. She lives down the street—the fifth house on the right. Her name's Mrs. Franklin."

Ellowan's face creased in a twinkling smile. "My thanks again, mistress, and good fortune attend you."

Eh, so, his luck had changed again. Once his skill was known, there'd be no lack of work for him. "A few coppers here and a farthing there, from many a kettle to mend; with solder and flux and skill to combine, there's many a copper to spend."

He was still humming as he rounded the house and found Mrs. Franklin hanging out dish towels on the back porch to dry. She was a somewhat stout woman, with the expression of fatigue that grows habitual in some cases, but her smile was as kindly as her daughter's when she spied the elf.

"Are you the little man my daughter said mended things?" she asked. "Susan phoned me that you'd be here—she took quite a fancy to you. Well, come up here on the porch and I'll bring out what I want fixed. I hope your rates aren't too high?"

"It's very reasonable you'll find them, mistress." He sank down on a three-legged stool he pulled from his bag and brought out a little table, while she went inside for the articles that needed repairs. There were knickknacks, a skillet, various pans, a copper wash boiler, and odds and ends of all sorts; enough to keep him busy till midday.

She set them down beside him. "Well, that's the lot of them. I've been meaning to throw most of them away, since nobody around here can fix them, but it seems a shame to see things wasted for some little hole. You just call me when you're through."

Ellowan nodded briskly and dug down into his seemingly bottomless bag. Out came his wonderful fluxes that could clean the thickest tarnish away in a twinkling, the polish that even the hardest grease and oldest soot couldn't defy, the bars of solder that became one with the metal, so that the sharpest eye would fail to note the difference; and out came the clever little tools that worked and smoothed the repair into unity with the original. Last of all, he drew forth a tiny anvil and a little charcoal brazier whose coals began to burn as he set it down. There was no fan or bellows, yet the coals in the center glowed fiercely at white heat.

The little elf reached out for the copper boiler, so badly dented that the seam had sprung open all the way down. A few light taps on his anvil straightened it back into smoothness. He spread on his polish, blew on it vigorously, and watched the dirt and dullness disappear, then applied his flux, and drew some of the solder onto it with a hot iron, chuckling as the seams became waterproof again. Surely now, even the long sleep had cost him none of his skill. As he laid it down, there was no sign to show that the boiler had not come freshly from some shop, or new out of the maker's hands.

The skillet was bright and shiny, except for a brown circle on the bottom, and gleamed with a silvery luster. Some magic craftsman must have made it, the elf thought, and it should receive special pains to make sure that the spell holding it so bright was not broken. He rubbed a few drops of polish over it carefully, inspected the loose handle, and applied his purple flux, swabbing off the small excess. Tenderly he ran the hot iron over the solder and began working the metal against the handle.

But something was very wrong. Instead of drawing firmly to the skillet, the solder ran down the side in little drops. Such as remained was loose and refused to stick. With a puzzled frown, Ellowan smelled his materials and tried again; there was nothing wrong with the solder or flux, but they still refused to work. He muttered softly and reached out for a pan with a pin hole in it.

Mrs. Franklin found him sitting there later, his tools neatly before him, the pots and pans stacked at his side, and the brazier glowing brightly. "All finished?" she asked cheerfully. "I brought you some coffee and a cinnamon bun I just baked; I thought you might like them." She set them down before the elf and glanced at the pile of utensils again. Only the boiler was fixed. "What—" she began sharply, but softened her question somewhat as she saw the bewildered frustration on his face. "I thought you said you could fix them?"

Ellowan nodded glumly. "That I did, mistress, and that I tried to do. But my solder and flux refused all but the honest copper, yonder, and there's never a thing I can make of them. Either these must be wondrous metals indeed, or my art has been bewitched."

"There's nothing very wonderful about aluminum and enamelware—nor stainless steel, either, except the prices they charge." She picked up the wash boiler and inspected his work. "Well, you did do this nicely, and you're not the only one who can't solder aluminum, I guess, so cheer up. And eat your roll before it's cold!"

"Thank'ee, mistress." The savory aroma of the bun had been tantalizing his stomach, but he had been waiting to make certain that he was welcome to it. "It's sorry I am to have troubled you, but it's a long time ago that I tinkered for my living, and this is new to me."

Mrs. Franklin nodded sympathetically, the poor little man must have been living with a son, or maybe working in a side show—he was short enough, and his costume was certainly theatrical. Well, hard times were hard times. "You didn't trouble me much, I guess. Besides, I needed the boiler tomorrow for wash day, so that's a big help, anyway. What do I owe you for it?"

"Tu'pence ha'penny," Ellowan said, taking out for the bun. Her look was uncertain, and he changed it quickly. "Five pence American, that is, mistress."

"Five cents! But it's worth ten times that!"

"It's but an honest price for the labor, mistress." Ellowan was putting the tools and materials back in his bag. "That's all I can take for the small bit I could do."

"Well—" She shrugged. "All right, if that's all you'll take, here it is." The coin she handed him seemed strange, but that was to be expected. He pocketed it with a quick smile and another "thank'ee," and went in search of a store he had noticed before.

The shop was confusing in the wide variety of articles it carried, but Ellowan spied tobacco and cigars on display and walked in. Now that he had eaten the bun, the tobacco was a more pressing need than food.

"Two pennies of tobacco, if it please you," he told the clerk, holding out the little leather pouch he carried.

"You crazy?" The clerk was a boy, much more interested in his oiled hair than in the customers who might come in.

"Cheapest thing I can give you is Duke's Mixture, and it'll cost you five cents, cash."

Regretfully Ellowan watched the nickel vanish over the counter; tobacco was indeed a luxury at the price. He picked up the small cloth bag, and the pasteboard folder the boy thrust at him. "What might this be?" he asked, holding up the folder.

"Matches." The boy grinned in fine superiority. "Where you been all your life? Okay, you do this…see? Course, if you don't want 'em—"

"Thank'ee." The elf pocketed the book of matches quickly and hurried toward the street, vastly pleased with his purchase. Such a great marvel as the matches alone surely was worth the price. He filled his clay pipe and struck one of them curiously, chuckling in delight as it flamed up. When he dropped the flame regretfully, he noticed that the tobacco, too, was imbued with magic, else surely it could never have been cured to such a mild and satisfying flavor. It scarcely bit his tongue.

But there was no time to be loitering around admiring his new treasures. Without work there could be no food, and supper was still to be taken care of. Those aluminum and enamelware pans were still in his mind, reminding him that coppers might be hard to get. But then, Mrs. Franklin had mentioned stainless steel, and only a mighty wizard could prevent iron from rusting; perhaps her husband was a worker in enchantments, and the rest of the village might be served in honest copper and hammered pewter. He shook his shoulders in forced optimism and marched down the street toward the other houses, noting the prices marked in a store window as he passed. Eh, the woman was right; he'd have to charge more for his services to eat at those rates.

The road was filled with the strange carriages driven by engines, and Ellowan stayed cautiously off the paving. But the stench from their exhausts and the dust they stirred up were still thick in his nostrils. The elf switched the bag from his left shoulder to his right and plodded on grimly, but there was no longer a tune on his lips, and the little bells refused to tinkle as he walked.

The sun had set, and it was already growing darker, bringing the long slow day to a close. His last call would be at the house ahead, already showing lights burning, and it was still some distance off. Ellowan pulled his belt tighter and marched toward it, muttering in slow time to his steps.

"Al-u-mi-num and en-am-el-ware and stain-*less* STEEL!" A row of green pans, red pots and ivory bowls ran before his eyes, and everywhere there was a glint of silvery skillets and dull white kettles. Even the handles used were no longer honest wood, but smelled faintly resinous.

Not one proper kettle in the whole village had he found. The housewives came out and looked at him, answered his smile, and brought forth their work for him in an oddly hesitant manner, as if they were unused to giving out such jobs at the door. It spoke more of pity than of any desire to have their wares mended.

"No, mistress, only copper. These new metals refuse my solder, and them I cannot mend." Over and again he'd repeated the words until they were as wooden as his knocks had grown; and always, there was no copper. It was almost a kindness when they refused to answer his knock.

He had been glad to quit the village and turn out on the road to the country, even though the houses were farther apart. Surely among the farming people, the older methods would still be in use. But the results were no different. They greeted him kindly and brought out their wares to him with less hesitancy than in the village—but the utensils were enamelware and aluminum and stainless steel!

Ellowan groped for his pipe and sank down on the ground to rest, noting that eight miles still lay between him and Northville. He measured out the tobacco carefully, and hesitated before using one of the new matches. Then, as he lit it, he watched the flame dully and tossed it listlessly aside. Even the tobacco tasted flat now, and the emptiness of his stomach refused to be fooled by the smoke, though it helped to take his mind away from his troubles. Eh, well, there was always that one last house to be seen, where fortune might smile on him long enough to furnish a supper. He shouldered the bag with a grunt and moved on.

A large German shepherd came bounding out at the elf as he turned in the gate to the farmhouse. The dog's bark was gruff and threatening, but Ellowan clucked softly and the animal quieted, walking beside him toward the house, its tail wagging slowly. The farmer watched the performance and grinned.

"Prinz seems to like you," he called out. "Tain't everyone he takes to like that. What can I do for you, lad?" Then, as Ellowan drew nearer, he looked more sharply. "Sorry—my mistake. For a minute there, I thought you was a boy."

"I'm a tinker, sir. A coppersmith, that is." The elf stroked the dog's head and looked up at the farmer wistfully. "Have you copper pots or pans, or odds of any kind, to be mended? I do very good work on copper, sir, and I'll be glad to work for only my supper."

The farmer opened the door and motioned him in. "Come on inside, and we'll see. I don't reckon we have, but the wife knows better." He raised his voice. "Hey, Louisa, where are you? In the kitchen?"

"In here, Henry." The voice came from the kitchen, and Ellowan followed the man back, the dog nuzzling his hand companionably. The woman was washing the last few dishes and putting the supper away as they entered, and the sight of food awoke the hunger that the elf had temporarily suppressed.

"This fellow says he's good at fixin' copper dishes, Louisa," Henry told his wife. "You got anything like that for him?" He bent over her ear and spoke in an undertone, but Ellowan caught the words. "If you got anything copper, he looks like he needs it, Lou. Nice little midget, seems to be, and Prinz took quite a shine to him."

Louisa shook her head slowly. "I had a couple of old copper kettles, only I threw them away when we got the aluminum cooking set. But if you're hungry, there's plenty of food still left. Won't you sit down while I fix it for you?"

Ellowan looked eagerly at the remains of the supper, and his mouth watered hotly, but he managed a smile, and his voice was determined. "Thank'ee kindly, mistress, but I can't. It's one of the rules I must live by not to beg or take what I cannot earn. But I'll be thanking you both for the thought, and wishing you a very good night."

They followed him to the door, and the dog trotted behind him until its master's whistle called it back. Then the elf was alone on the road again, hunting a place to sleep. There was a haystack back off the road that would make a good bed, and he headed for that. Well, hay was hardly nourishing, but chewing on it was better than nothing.

Ellowan was up with the sun again, brushing the dirt off his jerkin. As an experiment, he shook the runes out on the ground and studied them for a few minutes. "Eh, well," he muttered, tossing them back in the bag, "they speak well, but it's little faith I'd have in them for what is to come. It's too easy to shake them the way I'd want them to be. But per chance there'll be a berry or so in the woods yonder."

There were no berries, and the acorns were still green. Ellowan struck the highway again, drawing faint pleasure from the fact that few cars were on the road at that hour. He wondered again why their fumes, though unpleasant, bothered him as little as they did. His brothers, up in the grotto hidden in the Adirondacks, found even the smoke from the factories a deadening poison.

The smell of a good wood fire, or the fumes from alcohol in the glass-blower's lamp were pleasant to them. But with the coming of coal, a slow lethargy had crept over them, driving them back one by one into the hills to sleep. It had been bad enough when coal was burned in the hearths, but that Scotchman, Watts, had found that power could be drawn from steam, and the factories began spewing forth the murky fumes of acrid coal smoke. And the Little Folk had fled hopelessly from the poison, until Ellowan Coppersmith alone was left. In time, even he had joined his brothers up in the hills.

Now he had awakened again, without rhyme or reason, when the stench of the liquid called gasoline was added to that of coal. All along the highway were pumps that supplied it to the endless cars, and the taint of it in the air was omnipresent.

"Eh, well," he thought. "My brothers were ever filled with foolish pranks instead of honest work, while I found my pleasure in labor. Methinks the pranks weakened them against the poison, and the work gives strength; it was only after I hexed the factory owner that the sleep crept into my head, and sixscore years must surely pay the price of one such trick. Yet, when I first awakened, it's thinking I was that there was some good purpose that drew me forth."

The sight of an orchard near the road caught his attention, and the elf searched carefully along the strip of grass outside the fence in the hope that an apple might have been blown outside. But only inside was there fruit, and to cross the fence would be stealing. He left the orchard reluctantly and started to turn in at the road leading to the farmhouse. Then he paused.

After all, the farms were equipped exactly as the city now, and such faint luck as he'd had yesterday had been in the village. There was little sense in wasting his effort among the scattered houses of the country, in the unlikely chance that he might find copper. In the city, at least, there was little time wasted, and it was only by covering as many places as he could that he might hope to find work. Ellowan shrugged, and turned back on the highway; he'd save his time and energy until he reached Northville.

It was nearly an hour later when he came on the boy, sitting beside the road and fussing over some machine. Ellowan stopped as he saw the scattered parts and the worried frown on the lad's face. Little troubles seemed great to twelve-year-olds.

"Eh, now, lad," he asked, "is it trouble you're having there? And what might be that contrivance of bars and wheels?"

"It's a bicycle; ever'body knows that." From the sound of the boy's voice, tragedy had reared a large and ugly head. "And I've only had it since last Christmas. Now it's broke and I can't fix it."

He held up a piece that had come from the hub of the wheel. "See? That's the part that swells up when I brake it. It's all broken, and a new coaster brake costs five dollars."

Ellowan took the pieces and smelled them; his eyes had not been deceived. It was brass. "So?" he asked. "Now that's a shame, indeed. And a very pretty machine it was. But perchance I can fix it."

The boy looked up hopefully as he watched the elf draw out the brazier and tools. Then his face fell. "Naw, mister. I ain't got the money. All I got's a quarter, and I can't get it, 'cause it's in my bank, and mom won't let me open it."

The elf's reviving hopes of breakfast faded away, but he smiled casually. "Eh, so? Well, lad, there are other things than money. Let's see what we'll be making of this."

His eyes picked out the relation of the various parts, and his admiration for the creator of the machine rose. That hub was meant to drive the machine, to roll free, or to brake as the user desired. The broken piece was a split cylinder of brass that was arranged to expand against the inside of the hub when braking. How it could have been damaged was a mystery, but the ability of boys to destroy was no novelty to Ellowan.

Under his hands, the rough edges were smoothed down in a twinkling, and he ran his strongest solder into the break, filling and drawing it together, then scraping and abrading the metal smooth again. The boy's eyes widened.

"Say, mister, you're good! Them fellers in the city can't do it like that, and they've got all kinds of tools, too." He took the repaired piece and began threading the parts back on the spindle. "Gosh, you're little. D'you come out of a circus?"

Ellowan shook his head, smiling faintly. The questions of children had always been candid, and honest replies could be given them. "That I did not, lad, and I'm not a midget, if that's what you'd be thinking. Now didn't your grandmother tell you the old tales of the elves?"

"An elf!" The boy stopped twisting the nuts back on. "Go on! There ain't such things—I don't guess." His voice grew doubtful, though, as he studied the little brown figure. "Say, you do look like the pi'tures I seen, at that, and it sure looked like magic the way you fixed my brake. Can you really do magic?"

"It's never much use I had for magic, lad. I had no time for learning it, when business was better. The honest tricks of my trade were enough for me, with a certain skill that was ever mine. And I wouldn't be mentioning this to your parents, if I were you."

"Don't worry, I won't; they'd say I was nuts." The boy climbed on the saddle, and tested the brake with obvious satisfaction. "You goin' to town? Hop on and put your bag in the basket here. I'm goin' down within a mile of there—if you can ride on the rack."

"It would be a heavy load for you, lad, I'm thinking." Ellowan was none too sure of the security of such a vehicle, but the ride would be most welcome.

"Naw. Hop on. I've carried my brother, and he's heavier'n you. Anyway, that's a Mussimer two-speed brake. Dad got it special for Christmas." He reached over for Ellowan's bag, and was surprised by its lightness. Those who help an elf usually found things easier than they expected. "Anyway, I owe you sumpin' for fixin' it."

Ellowan climbed on the luggage rack at the rear and clutched the boy tightly at first. The rack was hard, but the paving smoothed out the ride, and it was far easier than walking. He relaxed and watched the road go by in a quarter of the time he could have traveled it on foot. If fortune smiled on him, breakfast might be earned sooner than he had hoped.

"Well, here's where I stop," the boy finally told him. "The town's down, there about a mile. Thanks for fixin' my bike."

Ellowan dismounted cautiously, and lifted out his bag. "Thank'ee for helping me so far, lad. And I'm thinking the brake will be giving you little trouble hereafter." He watched the boy ride off on a side road, and started toward the town, the serious business of breakfast uppermost in his mind.

Breakfast was still in his mind when midday had passed, but there was no sign that it was nearer his stomach. He came out of an alley and stopped for a few draws on his pipe and a chance to rest his shoulders. He'd have to stop smoking soon; on an empty stomach too much tobacco is nauseating. Over the smell of the smoke, another odor struck his nose, and he turned around slowly.

It was the clean odor of hot metal in a charcoal fire, and came from a sprawling old building a few yards away. The sign above was faded, but he made out the words: **MICHAEL DONAHUE—HORSESHOEING AND AUTO REPAIRS**. The sight of a blacksmith shop aroused memories of pleasanter days, and Ellowan drew nearer.

The man inside was in his fifties, but his body spoke of strength and clean living, and the face under the mop of red hair was open and friendly. At the moment, he was sitting on a stool, finishing a sandwich. The odor of the food reached out and stirred the elf's stomach again, and he scuffed his sandals against the ground uneasily. The man looked up.

"Saints presarve us!" Donahue's generous mouth opened to its widest. "Sure, and it's one o' the Little Folk, the loike as me feyther tolt me. Now fwhat—Och, now, but it's hungry ye'd be from the look that ye have, and me eatin' before ye! Here now, me hearty, it's yerself as shud have this bread."

"Thank'ee." Ellowan shook his head with an effort, but it came harder this time. "I'm an honest worker, sir, and it's one of the rules that I can't be taking what I cannot earn. But there's never a piece of copper to be found in all the city for me to mend." He laid his hands on a blackened bench to ease the ache in his legs.

"Now that's a shame." The brogue dropped from Donahue's speech, now that the surprise of seeing the elf was leaving him. "It's a good worker you are, too, if what my father told me was true. He came over from the old country when I was a bit of a baby, and his father told him before that. Wonderful workers, he said you were."

"I am that." It was a simple statement as Ellowan made it; boasting requires a certain energy, even had he felt like it. "Anything of brass or copper I can fix, and it'll be like new when I finish."

"Can you that?" Donahue looked at him with interest. "Eh, maybe you can. I've a notion to try you out. You wait here." He disappeared through the door that divided his smithy from the auto servicing department and came back with a large piece of blackened metal in his hand. The elf smelled it questioningly and found it was brass.

Donahue tapped it lightly. "That's a radiator, m'boy. Water runs through these tubes here and these little fins cool it off. Old Pete Yaegger brought it in and wanted it fixed, but it's too far ruined for my hands. And he can't afford a new one. You fix that now, and I'll be giving you a nice bit of money for the work."

"Fix it I can." Ellowan's hands were trembling as he inspected the corroded metal core, and began drawing out his tools. "I'll be finished within the hour."

Donahue looked doubtfully at the elf, but nodded slowly. "Now maybe you will. But first, you'll eat, and we'll not be arguing about that. A hungry man never did good work, and I'm of the opinion the same applies to yourself. There's still a sandwich and a bit of pie left, if you don't mind washing it down with water."

The elf needed no water to wash down the food. When Donahue looked at him next, the crumbs had been licked from the paper, and Ellowan's deft hands were working his clever little tools through the fins of the radiator, and his face was crinkling up into its usual merry smile. The metal seemed to run and flow through his hands with a will of its own, and he was whistling lightly as he worked.

Ellowan waited intently as Donahue inspected the finished work. Where the blackened metal had been bent and twisted, and filled with holes, it was now shining and new. The smith could find no sign to indicate that it was not all one single piece, now, for the seams were joined invisibly.

"Now that's craftsmanship," Donahue admitted. "I'm thinking we'll do a deal of business from now on, the two of us, and there's money in it, too. Ellowan, m'boy, with work like that we can buy up old radiators, remake them, and at a nice little profit for ourselves we can sell them again. You'll be searching no further for labor."

The elf's eyes twinkled at the prospect of long lines of radiators needing to be fixed, and a steady supply of work without the need of searching for it. For the first time, he realized that industrialization might have its advantages for the worker.

Donahue dug into a box and came out with a little metal figure of a greyhound, molded on a threaded cap. "Now, while I get something else for you, you might be fixing this," he said. "'Tis a godsend that you've come to me....Eh, now that I think of it, what brings you here, when I thought it'd he in the old country you worked?"

"That was my home," the elf agreed, twisting the radiator cap in his hands and straightening out the broken threads. "But the people became too poor in the country, and the cities were filled with coal smoke. And then there was word of a new land across the sea, so we left, such of us as remained, and it was here we stayed until the smoke came again, and sent us sleeping into the hills. Eh, it's glad I am now to be awake again."

Donahue nodded. "And it's not sorry I am. I'm a good blacksmith, but there's never enough of that for a man to live now, and mostly I work on the autos. And there, m'boy, you'll be a wonderful help to be sure. The parts I like least are the ignition system and generator, and there's copper in them where your skill will be greater than mine. And the radiators, of course."

Ellowan's hands fumbled on the metal, and he set it down suddenly. "Those radiators, now—they come from a car?"

"That they do." Donahue's back was turned as he drew a horseshoe out of the forge and began hammering it on the anvil. He could not see the twinkle fade from the elf's eyes and the slowness with which the small fingers picked up the radiator cap.

Ellowan was thinking of his people, asleep in the hills, doomed to lie there until the air should be cleared of the poisonous fumes. And here he was, working on parts of the machines that helped to make those fumes. Yet, since there was little enough else to do, he had no choice but; to keep on; cars or no cars, food was still the prime necessity.

Donahue bent the end of a shoe over to a calk and hammered it into shape, even with the other one. "You'll be wanting a place to sleep?" he asked casually. "Well, now, I've a room at the house that used to be my boy's, and it'll just suit you. The boy's at college and won't be needing it."

"Thank'ee kindly." Ellowan finished the cap and put it aside distastefully.

"The boy'll be a great engineer some day," the smith went on with a glow of pride. "And not have to follow his father in the trade. And it's a good thing, I'm thinking. Because some day, when they've used up all their coal and oil, there'll be no money in the business at all, even with the help of these newfangled things. My father was a smith, and I'm by way of being smith and mechanic—but not the boy."

"They'll use up all the coal and oil—entirely?"

"They will that, now. Nobody knows when, but the day's acoming. And then they'll be using electricity or maybe alcohol for fuel. It's a changing world, lad, and we old ones can't change to keep with it."

Ellowan picked up the radiator cap and polished it again. Eh, so. One day they'd use up all the sources of evil, and the air would be pure again. The more cars that ran, the sooner that day would come, and the more he repaired, the more would run.

"Eh, now," he said gayly. "I'll be glad for more of those radiators to mend. But until then, perchance I could work a bit of yonder scrap brass into more such ornaments as this one."

Somehow, he was sure, when his people came forth again, there'd be work for all.

Doubled in Brass

Ellowan Coppersmith stopped outside the building and inspected the sign with more than faint pleasure. It was a new one, gleaming copper letters on a black background catching the first rays of the sun, and showing up clearly against the newly painted walls. It read:

DONAHUE & COPPERSMITH
Blacksmithing—Auto Repairs
All Work in Copper:
RADIATORS A SPECIALTY

To be sure, it was not his idea to join Michael Donahue in partnership, but the smith had insisted when the shop was remodeled, and the elf's protests had not been too loud. Now that the sign was up, he found the sight a pleasant one. But there was work to be done, as usual, and Ellowan was not one to waste his time. He unlocked the shop and went back to his workroom, the little bells on his shoes tinkling in time to his whistling.

"Eh, now," he chuckled at the sight of the radiators waiting his work. "It's a fortune we'll be making yet, and never the need of hunting my work. I'll be wanting no more than to stay here."

The elf picked up the first radiator and placed it in the clamps on his worktable, arranged his charcoal brazier and cunning little tools, and raised his three-foot body up onto the stool. Things had indeed changed since the day when he awoke in the hills where his people had retired in sleep to escape the poisonous fumes of coal. He had found that there was little use for his skill in copper and brass; the people no longer used copper utensils, and it had been hard with him until he drifted into this town and found the smithy.

Michael Donahue had given him a copper radiator to mend, and the excellence of his work had suggested a permanent job working on the brass and copper parts of the autos and making little ornaments for the radiator caps. And though the fumes of the autos were as bad as the coal smoke which had poisoned his people, he had found pleasure in the thought that someday all the coal and gas must be used up, and his people could once more come out into the world.

As his skill had become known, more work was found. Donahue bought old radiators, Ellowan mended them better than their original, and they resold them for an excellent profit. Now the shop had been repaired, and the elf had a workroom to himself. His old clothes had given place to a modern style of dress, except for the little turned-up sandals with their copper bells; modern shoes hurt his feet. And the people of the town had become used to him, and accepted him as merely a pleasant little midget who did unusually fine work.

Under his hands, the twisted shell of the radiator which had been smashed in an accident became whole again. His little tools straightened the fins, and the marvelous flux and solder he used made the tubes watertight once more, until it was gleaming and perfect. He set it aside, and the bright glow of his brazier sank instantly into blackness as its work was done. The clock, whose hands pointed at seven, indicated it was breakfast time, and his cereal and milk would be waiting in the little lunchroom down the street.

Ellowan was coming from his own workroom to the smithy when he saw the battered little car drive up. A red-headed young man one size too large for the car climbed out. His face was pleasant and open, and he wore a wide smile, but still managed to convey the impression that whatever he had to do left him highly uncomfortable.

"Is Mr. Donahue here?" he asked of the elf.

"That Donahue is not. He'll not be coming in until the hour of eight." Ellowan studied the other and decided he liked what he saw. "And you should be the one to know that, too, Patrick."

"So you recognize me? I suppose you're Ellowan Coppersmith that my father wrote me about?"

"Aye, I'm Ellowan. Eh, now, it's thinking I was that you'd be at the college studying to be the great engineer."

"Uh-huh." The grin was distinctly sheepish now. "I couldn't stand the math. As an engineer, I'm a fine machinist, and that's all; so they told me I could come home. Now I'll have to face the music and tell Dad what happened to his plans."

"Eh, so? Now that's a shame, indeed, but not one that a good breakfast won't make better." Ellowan locked the shop carefully and started down the street, his short, stubby hand plucking at the boy. "A man takes things best at his work, and your father isn't the one to spoil a good rule. It's hungry you must be after the night of driving, and a pretty waitress to serve the food will do you no harm."

Patrick fell in behind. His face was incapable of looking anything but good-natured, nor could his worry ruin his appetite. But the waitress failed to draw more than a casual glance from him. The elf watched him carefully for signs of the normal male curiosity, then searched through his memory of Donahue's conversations for some clue.

His brown eyes twinkled as he found it, and his rough bronzed skin crinkled up until his beard threatened to stand out straight before him. "Now I'm minded that young men have a habit of not coming home when there's trouble they're in," he said calmly. "And it's not the like of what you'd do except for good reason, when there's work to be found at all. Now who might the girl be, Patrick?"

"People call me Pat, Ellowan." He took three times too long in eating the food on his fork, then answered indirectly. "I heard that Mary Kroning was seeing quite a lot of young Wilson. I don't like him, and—well, I do like her. Know them?"

"Eh, that I do. A sweet lass, and a pretty one. It's a shame, to be sure, that her father can work no more from the stroke that he had. And Hubert Wilson has the money, though I'm not saying he's the man for the girl. It's nothing but trouble we've had since his car came to the shop for our work."

Pat nodded heavy agreement. "Wilson's a swine, and looks like one."

"That may be. But I'd not be telling the girl of that," the elf advised. He counted out the price of the breakfast and carefully left the proper tip for the waitress. It had taken time, but he had finally learned that money was much cheaper than that he had used a hundred and twenty years before. Then they headed back to the shop, and the elf returned to his workbench.

But this time he did not glance at the radiators, nor did the little brazier glow brightly as he sat down. Ellowan liked the smith for his broad common sense and good-humored fellowship, and he owed him gratitude for the work and the partnership. From what he had seen, he liked the boy as well—certainly better than the greasy superiority of Hubert Wilson.

Eh, well, there was only one answer. Pat must win Mary, and to keep her, he must secure work from which he was sure of a good living. The elf chuckled suddenly, and dropped down to go over to his bag that still hung on the wall of the smithy. From within it, he produced an ingot of brass that had retained its luster through the years of his sleep, and sped back into his workshop.

There were new tools there, in addition to the old ones he had carried, tools that he polished and cared for as if they were living things. Now he switched on the motor and inserted the brass bar into a small lathe, working it deftly into the rough shape he desired. Always to him, the turning lathe partook of magic, though he understood the mechanical principles well enough. But that men should make metal serve them so easily was in itself magic, and good magic that he did not hesitate to use.

Satisfied with the rough form, he climbed back on the stool and began cutting and scraping with his instruments, breaking the bar apart in the middle to make two identical pieces. Donahue came into the smithy as he worked, and he could hear the mutter of voices after the first surprised exclamation. His sharp ears made out most of their speech, but it was the same in nature as what Pat had told him, and he went on with his work, paying them little attention. The metal was shaping up beautifully.

Again he put them on the lathe, shaping up the base of the figurines and cutting threads on them. Completed, they were little statues, a few inches high, molded above a conventional radiator cap. But they were unusual in lacking the conventional streamline greyhound or bird; instead they carried small replicas of Ellowan himself, as he had looked in the old jerkin and tights when he first came to town, and the eyes seemed to twinkle back at him. He chuckled.

"It's neat copies you are, if I do say it myself, and it's good material you have in you. I'm thinking there were never yet better ornaments—nor more useful," he told them. "Almost I'm sorry to silver the one of you."

Donahue and Pat came into the room as he finished the silvering. "The boy's staying with us for the time," Donahue informed the elf. "But I'll not be moving you; he's taking the guest room until he finds a job. When might you be done with the Wilson car?"

Ellowan was unscrewing the old cap and putting the silvered copy of himself in its place. "Finished it is now, all new wires. And a free cap I'll give him for the money it costs." He looked at the ornament in place and nodded, well pleased. Surely Hubert Wilson would like it. It was novel and shiny enough to please his love of display.

Pat examined the copper one thoughtfully. "You're an artist, Ellowan. But I prefer this to the other; the color suits you better, and I think the face is more cheerful. Who's this for?"

"Who but yourself, lad? There's never a bright spot on the car that you drive, and this will serve, I'm thinking."

"And more than he deserves," Donahue said. "Now be off, you young fool, and don't bother honest men at their labors. There's food in the icebox, and your credit will be good at the store. Since it's loafing you'll be, loaf at home." When Pat had gone, he winked at Ellowan and grinned.

"Now there's a boy for you, Coppersmith. And it's glad I am that he'll be wasting no more time at school. Foosh! 'Twas time and money wasted, that it was." The ways of a father and son change little with the passing of time.

Ellowan nodded silently and went back to his work, while Donahue stepped into the smithy and began hammering out iron on the anvil. If a man had work, there was little more he needed, save a wife for the young and a son for the old.

The moon was full and the air was cool and sweet. Ellowan sat on the back porch with Donahue, each smoking thoughtfully and saying little. Out in the garden there was a sudden rustling sound, then a faint plop-plop on the grass before them. The smith looked down.

"More rabbits," he said. "Now where would they all be coming from, this near the town? Shoo! Go along with you! I'd have no rabbits eating my vegetables."

The rabbits looked up at him, and one of them thumped a hind leg nervously on the ground, but they refused to move. Ellowan caught Donahue's arm as he started to rise. "They'll not harm the garden." He made a little clucking sound in his throat and the rabbits drew closer. "It's to see me they've come, and there's not a leaf of lettuce they'll touch, except such weeds as they like."

"Friends of yours?"

"Now that they are, as you should know. Haven't the Little People and rabbits been friends since they hid together in the same burrows from the giants? But I'll send them away and let you say the words you'd be thinking." Again he made the clucking sounds, and the rabbits kicked out a little thudding chorus on the grass, then turned and hopped peacefully away—all except one that went out into the yard to examine some weeds that looked edible.

Donahue watched it for a few minutes, then turned back to the elf. "I'm sorry for the boy. His heart's set on the girl, but it's only right that she'd be thinking of her father needing care and the mother with hardly enough to live on. And money comes hard to a young man here. Never a chance does he have."

"Eh, so; but there's many a girl who thinks of money but doesn't choose it. I'd not be worrying about the boy." The elf picked up a package at his feet and brought out three small articles that looked like dust filters to be worn over the nose. "What might ozone be?"

"Eh? Oh, ozone. Have you smelled the air close to the big electric motor? Well, that'll be the stuff. Why, now?"

"I bought these at the drugstore and the clerk was telling me they settled the dust, cleaned the air, and gave off ozone. See, there's a battery that's to be worn on the waist, and a wire to run to the thing. Do you think it might make bad air good?"

"It might that. But precious little ozone you'll get from those batteries, though some there might be. I've seen the like of it used for hay fever."

"Aye. That he told me. And that there were big machines to make more of it for an office. I was for trying it on, and he let me. 'Tis a wonderful invention, I'm thinking."

"Maybe." The smith rose, stretching his big frame. "Though there's more interest in bed, to be sure, that I have. A good night to you." He turned into the house.

Ellowan whistled softly, and two rabbits stuck their heads out of the bushes and came closer.

"Now, maybe you'd like a ride?" he asked them, and listened to the thudding of their feet. "So? Then come along." He headed for a shed, their little bodies following quietly. For a second he disappeared, while they waited patiently, to come out with a small-framed bicycle. Since the time when a boy had carried him into the town on a wheel, the elf had been fascinated with such an easy way of traveling, and his first money had gone into the purchase of one, built specially to fit him, and equipped with a three-speed device.

He put his bundle into the basket and picked up the rabbits. They were familiar with such rides and made no protest as he put them beside the bundle. He chuckled. "Now, it's a longer ride you'll get this night. I've five hours before the boy'll be coming home, or he's into what I'm thinking, and there's more than a little road to be covered in that time."

They flattened out, little noses quivering with excitement, and he mounted quickly. There were strong muscles in his corded short legs, and the speed that he made would have surprised the boys who saw him riding only around the town. The road slipped by him smoothly and silently, his faint whistling broken only by a few muttered words. "And they'll be filling the air with poison when there's the like of this to be ridden. Eh, well."

Ellowan's guess as to the time of Pat's return was a shrewd one. The little elf had barely put his bicycle away and turned the rabbits loose when the battered car came chugging along. He settled back on a seat and watched the auto, paying no attention to the rabbits that scampered back and forth across the driveway.

Nor did Pat; his thoughts were not on the driving, and his eyes only focused enough to enable him to reach the garage. Sure of the elf's protection, the rabbits gave no more thought to the car than the man did to them.

Since no one else bothered, the car seemed to take matters into its own hands. A rabbit sat placidly chewing a leaf until the wheels were within a few feet of it. The little car jerked, bucked sideways, and left the driveway for the lawn, only to run toward another squatting there. Again it bucked, seemed to consider, and found no opening. The motor roared, and it darted forward, straight toward the animal. Then the wheels left the ground abruptly, front first, followed by the rear, and the auto headed for the garage, leaving the rabbit eating steadily where he had first been.

Ellowan chuckled as Pat came out of the garage, swearing under his breath. "'Tis a pleasant car you have, methinks," the elf observed.

"Must have hit a rock somewhere. I thought sure I'd hit one of those silly animals, but it seems I didn't." Pat pulled at one ear and stared back at the garage. "I've had trouble with the car all evening. First it backfired; almost seemed to pick the times when Mary and I started to quarrel. Then it stopped out in the country, and I couldn't start it for an hour."

"Now it's little trouble I'd call that. Was she minding the stop?"

"Well," the boy admitted, "she didn't seem to. But it's no go, Ellowan. She even told me she wished I'd never come back."

"Eh, so? Now there are many reasons she could have for that, indeed. When a girl likes a boy, and there's money she needs that he'll not be having, perchance she'd welcome him less because of the liking she has." The elf smiled at some joke of his own.

Pat nodded slowly. "Maybe you're right, at that. But money doesn't grow on trees."

"It depends on the man who owns the tree. There's a wonderful demand for ornaments of brass, wrought by true craftsmen. I'd a letter from a man who'd been seeing some of the work I do, and it was wanting me to make more for his trade, and at good prices, too. Now, if you were to start a small factory for the making of hinges and doorknobs, ashtrays and fruit bowls, there'd be money for you."

"Uh-huh. I thought of that when I saw your radiator cap. But it takes money to start, and workmen in brass are rare. I'd need money, some machinery, a building, and men—even if you know of a market. That's a tall order."

"Mayhap. Don't be worrying your head with it, lad. The sleep's more needed than the money. And I'll be getting a bit myself." Ellowan nodded good night as they passed inside and turned to his own room, still chuckling over the action of the car. Eh, now, that was good brass in the ornament, and unusual, too.

It was another night, and the elf had finished supper and gone to his own room. From a bureau drawer he drew out a handful of thin sticks and tossed them on the floor, studying them thoughtfully until they made sense to him. "Now, they're not the equal in prediction to the future itself, but they seem sure enough," he muttered. "And the boy's been telling me his Mary was seeing the Wilson pup this night. I'm thinking a ride might do me no harm."

He pocketed the runes, hoping their information might be accurate, as it sometimes was, and went out to his bicycle, tossing a small bag in the basket. Rabbits hopped around, thumping out their desire to go with him, but he shooed them off and set out alone. He slipped out of the town in short order, and out through the pleasant moonlit country around, until he came to a little winding lane that led back through a wooded section. There was a tiny clearing a way farther on, and tire marks on the dirt indicated that it was not unknown to the boys of the town.

Ellowan turned back into the woods, some distance below the clearing, and concealed his wheel. From the bag he pulled out a large cloth and tied it about his face, over his nose. Then he whistled shrilly, and sat down to wait until the rabbits could respond, studying the runes again. Satisfied with them, he looked up at the circle of gray bodies and bright eyes around him. Little muttered words came to his lips, while the noses of the rabbits twitched excitedly.

They started off obediently, if somewhat reluctantly, each going in a direction slightly different from the others. There was another wait before two returned. Then he whistled the others to cease and followed the first rabbit, the second hopping along behind. They passed through most of the woods before they reached their objective.

A small animal with a bushy tail was sedately looking under a log for insects, and the stripes along its back identified it clearly. Ellowan muttered unhappily, and the rabbits refused to go farther. The elf sidled in cautiously, careful not to make a hostile move, and began dropping the food from the bag to the ground, making a trail back toward the clearing. Watching him carefully, the skunk moved over and investigated the line of food, moving along slowly, in no haste to go anywhere.

The second rabbit led off a short distance to another skunk, and the process was repeated until both trails joined and were connected to the clearing. There the elf scattered the remainder of the bag's contents and moved hurriedly away, seeking a position upwind from the spot, but well within range of his sharp eyes and ears.

He felt nauseated and cursed his own dumbness for being unable to plan a better scheme. "Aghh!" he grunted. "It's bad enough the fumes of coal may be, but this smell is worse. If I'd not met one once before, I'd never believe there'd be such beasts. In that, the Old Country is better than the new. *Ehu!*"

The wait was longer this time, and the moon crept up until its light shone full on the clearing. Ellowan tossed the runes again, but they were still in the same pattern, and he muttered. Three times should be proof enough, but their prediction had still not come true. Then the faint sound of a car came from down the lane, and he watched tensely until it appeared.

It was the right one, with the little silvered figure shining on the top of the radiator. A low, heavy convertible it was, chosen with the obvious bad taste and love of display that were typical of the Wilsons, but money in goodly quantity had gone into its purchase. Inside, the elf made out the fat, smirking face of Hubert Wilson, and the troubled face of Mary Kroning.

Wilson swung it up in a rush, braked sharply where the wheel tracks were thickest, gunned the motor, and cut it off. Out of the car came words in Wilson's pompous voice.

"Runs pretty sweet now. But the way Donahue fixes cars, I suppose it'll go to pieces again in a week. Charged me sixty bucks for the work, and probably palmed off the shoddiest material he could find. I told him so, too."

Mary's weak protest sounded tired and Ellowan guessed that there had been little sleep for her the night before. "I don't think Mr. Donahue would do that to you. He's always been very careful in the work he did for us, and his prices are lower than we can get elsewhere."

"Sure, why wouldn't they be when it's the only way he can get work? Anyway, he's crazy enough to think you'll marry that dumb son of his." Wilson moved slightly on the seat and Mary drew back into a corner. "And that reminds me; I heard you were out with him last night, and I don't like it. Probably got in trouble and kicked out of college, so he comes sneaking back here to his father. You keep away from him, understand? I don't want my girl going with such people."

"He's not dumb, and he didn't get in trouble. I think—" She checked the words quickly and deliberately softened her voice. "I'm not engaged to you yet, Hubert, and I don't think you should try to dictate my choice of friends. I've known Pat for years. Why shouldn't I see him when he returns?"

"Because I don't like it and won't have it! I used to think you were sweet on him, but that's all done. Anyway, he couldn't take you to the movies now, even the cheap ones. His old man's spent most of his money fixing up the shop and just paid back the loan from our bank."

"Let's not argue, Hubert. I'm tired, too tired for another quarrel. I wish you'd take me home."

"Aw, it's only eleven. Stay here a little while and we'll go over to the Brown Pudding Inn. It's the most expensive place around, and they've got an orchestra that's really hot!"

"I'm tired, Hubert, and I don't want to go to the inn. I've been looking for work all day. Take me home and I'll see you tomorrow and let you take me to the inn if you want."

"If that's the way you feel." He straightened up slowly, a petulant frown on his face. "Anyway, I told you you didn't need work; I'll send your dad to the hospital and take care of you if you'll promise to marry me. Oh, all right. But why don't you let me get you a job in the bank? All I gotta do is say the word and you're hired."

Ellowan saw that Wilson was making slow signs of giving in and leaving, and he decided it was time to act. The big rabbit at his feet thumped heavily at his orders, then loyalty conquered instinct, and it moved off. As it left, the elf saw two pairs of eyes shining in the underbrush, and the skunks poked sharp little heads through to gaze at the quantity of food nearer the car. They moved forward slowly, uncertain of the auto, but fairly confident of their natural protection.

Wilson was grabbing for the brake when the rabbit scampered out of the woods into the clearing and headed for the car. With a bound, it hopped to the running board, jumped from there to the hood of the engine, and cleared the windshield to land in Wilson's lap. His clawing hands missed it, and it was in the back seat, leaving a streak of mud on the newly laundered suit and a scratch from a sharp toenail on his forehead. The words he said were ones no lady should hear from a man.

Again it bounced, landing on his head, then thumping down on the hood again. Wilson sprawled out, diving for it, and the rabbit hit the ground and began circling the man, just out of reach. "Get out of that car and help me catch this thing!" he shouted at Mary. "For the love of Peter, don't sit there like a bump on a log! Aren't there any brains under your hair?"

"Leave it alone and come back to the car. You can't catch it, and I want to go back."

"I don't care what you want; I'll fix this fellow." He stopped his frantic attempts and climbed back in the car. "Maybe I can't catch it, but we'll see what the car can do."

Ellowan's eyes turned back to the skunks, moving along toward the manna from heaven they saw and smelled in the clearing. They knew perfectly well that the insane hoppings of the rabbit were harmless, and took no notice of them.

Wilson gunned the motor and threw the machine into second savagely. It jerked forward, straight at the rabbit—and straight for the skunks. This was a new menace to them, and they jerked their heads up and erected the danger signal of their tails. Wilson did not see them, nor did he notice a sudden change in the radiator cap. The two brass hands were creeping slowly up over the little nose.

The car bucked and backfired, and the wheels seemed filled with life, trying to drag the car to the right. The gear lever suddenly shifted to neutral and the car stopped. Alert and poised for action, the skunks were waiting on a hair-trigger balance; the rabbit decided it was time to leave.

But now Wilson's anger was transferred to the car, and he fought it fiercely, jamming it back into gear. It backfired again, and the skunks decided they had waited long enough. With a unison of action that seemed preplanned, they opened fire and the wind favored them. Mary took her frightened eyes off Wilson and tried to hide her nose from the stench. Wilson let go of the wheel, and his face turned pale and sick.

But the car, left without a guiding hand, took matters onto itself. The front end jumped up and twisted around, and the machine bobbed in a crazy circle, streaking away from the skunks. It slowed and the engine sputtered and coughed, then seemed to decide things could be no worse than they were, and stopped.

Wilson opened his mouth and spilled out words, first at the car, then at Mary. She bore it in stolid silence for a few minutes, but there are limits to all things, even the need of money. Ellowan grinned as she reached for the door and climbed out, turning down the lane toward the general highway and leaving young Wilson ranting to himself.

Then a vagary of the wind let a few whiffs of the air from the clearing reach the elf, and he ran back toward his bicycle. His work was done, and it was an excellent time to leave.

Business in the smithy was slack the next day, and Donahue was across the street, playing billiards, when Pat came into the shop in the early afternoon, looking much more cheerful than previously. "Mary's given up Wilson," he announced, as he might have spoken of discovering perpetual motion. "She called me up this morning, and we've been talking things over since then. I don't know what happened, but she's through with him."

"Eh, now, and it's glad I am to hear that." Ellowan dropped his work and squatted on a bench across from the boy, wondering how well she had rid herself of the smell of skunk. "And did she tell you she'd be marrying you?"

Some of the joy went out of Pat's face. "No, but she practically did. I've got to get a job, though, paying enough to support her and help the family along. She'll probably find work for a while, and it won't take so terribly much. They've almost enough to live on. But I'll need at least twice as much as I can make here."

"There'd be money in the selling of handmade brass trinkets," the elf pointed out again. "A very good sum, indeed, and immediately. Now, I've been doing some work with figures, and I'm thinking you'd be making more than you need, and could pay back the expense of the shop in little time, if your craftsmen knew the knack of the material."

"I figured it up too, from the letter you got giving prices, and there's a gold mine in it for a plant with a few workers. But where can I get men who can do the type of work you turn out? That's where the money is. And where would I get the initial outlay?"

"All in good time now." Ellowan filled his pipe and puffed at it thoughtfully. "It seems that the Wilsons have arrived as they telephoned. A bit of business and we'll talk this over afterwards, lad."

The Wilsons had indeed arrived, Hubert's car in front, driven by the chauffeur, and the banker driving his own car at a good distance off. Hubert Wilson stood on the front bumper of his auto, looking more miserable than seemed possible; his hand rested on the silvered radiator cap, and his thumb was caught between the little brass arms. The boys along the street added nothing to his comfort.

The older Wilson came bristling in, growling gruff words. "I'll slap a suit on you that'll make your ears ring," he threatened. "Hubert's caught in that thing you made, and can't get loose, unless we amputate his thumb. The metal simply can't be cut, for some reason."

"That suit now," the elf answered. "It might not help the thumb, and there's little fault I have in the matter. 'Tis his own carelessness—You should know that."

Since bluffing didn't work, Wilson tried the only other argument he knew. "All right, but get him loose. I'll give you fifty dollars for it and forget the whole thing."

Ellowan demurred. "There's a most unpleasant odor about the car," he pointed out. "I'm overly sensitive to such an odor, and there's fear in my heart that it might be poisonous to me. But if you'll come into the garage, I'll be glad indeed to talk of the matter with you."

Back in the building, the banker stormed and ranted, but it did him no good. The quiet words of the elf, inaudible to Pat, conquered in the end. "And I'll have it in cash, you understand," he finished. I'm not used to these checks, nor liking of them."

Wilson looked through the window at the sight of his son caught in that humiliating position and gave in. "Robbers!" he growled. "I'll send a boy with it, and to fetch your note." He stalked out of the shop quickly, climbed into his car, and drove off toward the bank.

Ellowan waited until the boy showed up, and exchanged a package for a piece of paper from the elf. Then he wrapped his face in moist cloths and took his tools out where Hubert Wilson stood. With a direction of purpose that gave no heed to the swearing and pleading of the man, he applied his little pinchers and pulled the arms loose from the thumb; the brass responded easily to his tug.

"And now," he said, unscrewing the cap and substituting one with a greyhound on it, "you'd best be off. We'll not be wanting your trade hereafter." He swung quickly into the shop, unmindful of the retort that reached his ears, and watched the car pull away. When the sickness from the stench left him, he turned back to Pat.

"Now as I was saying, there's money in copper artistry. And there's a building down the street that'll be lending itself perfectly to the work. It's quite cheap you could get it. As for the tools you'd need, they'd be few, since handwork is better for this than the cleverness of many machines."

"It would take at least three thousand dollars to start, and I'd have to get workers and pay them." Pat shook his head sadly. "Better forget it, Ellowan."

"Eh, so? And it's mistaken you are. In this pile you'll find the sum of five thousand of your dollars, which should start the shop and let you marry the girl when she will." He tossed the package over casually.

Pat grinned, but shoved it back. "So you blackmailed Wilson, did you? That's a high price for letting the youngster loose."

"It's not too high, I'm thinking, since it's but a loan. You'll be paying me, and I'll give it to him—with five percent interest, to be sure. And perhaps you'd turn up your nose at a chance to marry the girl when it's only a business agreement?"

Pat pocketed the money. "That way, I'll take it, provided you let me pay you at six percent. How long does your note run?"

"Five years, and you'll pay me but five percent, as I pay the banker. I'm tired indeed of the arguing you'd be doing." Ellowan turned back to his workroom. "Now it's workers you need, eh?"

"And it's workers I won't find, probably. Where can brass craftsmen be found who can do any amount of work by hand?"

The elf grinned and disappeared into the shop. He whistled once and reappeared, but not alone. Behind him were three others like him, differing but little, and all clearly of the Little People. They were dressed in brown leather clothes of a cut older than the mechanical age, but about their noses were filters with wires leading down to little batteries at their belts. Ellowan chuckled.

"Here, now, are the workers I brought back for you," he told Pat. "You'll find them quick with their hands and good workers, not greedy for money. But you'll be needing one of those machines that'd make ozone for the whole shop—only a little, but enough to counteract the poison of the air. 'Tis a marvelous invention. Now be off with you, and leave me with my friends. I'd have none of your thanks."

As Pat went out, shaking his head but smiling, the four elves turned back to the workroom, and Ellowan knew his task was well done. The boy would have the girl and his work would prosper, while the elf would no longer be alone in a world of men.

One of the others drew off his filter and tested the air. "Bad," he grunted. "But now that you've wakened us, there seems little enough harm in it. Perchance the years of sleep have given us strength against the poison fumes."

More likely it was the call to work, Ellowan reflected, stronger even than the poisons of the air. And someday when the boy's plant expanded, the call would be greater, and others might be awakened until the Little People could come into their own again. They were sleeping in the hills now, but not for long.

Helen O'Loy

I am an old man now, but I can still see Helen as Dave unpacked her, and still hear him gasp as he looked her over.

"Man, isn't she a beauty?"

She was beautiful, a dream in spun plastics and metals, something Keats might have seen dimly when he wrote his sonnet. If Helen of Troy had looked like that the Greeks must have been pikers when they launched only a thousand ships; at least, that's what I told Dave.

"Helen of Troy, eh?" He looked at her tag. "At least it beats this thing—K2W88. Helen…Mmmm…Helen of Alloy."

"Not much swing to that, Dave. Too many unstressed syllables in the middle. How about Helen O'Loy?"

"Helen O'Loy she is, Phil." And that's how it began—one part beauty, one part dream, one part science; add a stereo broadcast, stir mechanically, and the result is chaos.

Dave and I hadn't gone to college together, but when I came to Messina to practice medicine, I found him downstairs in a little robot repair shop. After that, we began to pal around, and when I started going with one twin, he found the other equally attractive, so we made it a foursome.

When our business grew better, we rented a house out near the rocket field—noisy but cheap, and the rockets discouraged apartment building. We liked room enough to stretch ourselves. I suppose, if we hadn't quarreled with them, we'd have married the twins in time. But Dave wanted to look over the latest Venus-rocket attempt when his twin wanted to see a display stereo starring Larry Ainslee, and they were both stubborn. From then on, we forgot the girls and spent our evenings at home.

But it wasn't until "Lena" put vanilla on our steak instead of salt that we got off on the subject of emotions and robots. While Dave was dissecting Lena to find the trouble, we naturally mulled over the future of the mechs. He was sure that the robots would beat men some day, and I couldn't see it.

"Look here, Dave," I argued. "You know Lena doesn't think—not really. When those wires crossed, she could have corrected herself. But she didn't bother; she followed the mechanical impulse. A man might have reached for the vanilla, but when he saw it in his hand, he'd have stopped. Lena has sense enough, but she has no emotions, no consciousness of self."

"All right, that's the big trouble with the mechs now. But we'll get around it, put in some mechanical emotions, or something." He screwed Lena's head back on, turned on her juice. "Go back to work, Lena, it's nineteen o'clock."

Now I specialized in endocrinology and related subjects. I wasn't exactly a psychologist, but I did understand the glands, secretions, hormones, and miscellanies that are the physical causes of emotions. It took medical science three hundred years to find out how and why they worked, and I couldn't see men duplicating them mechanically in much less time.

I brought home books and papers to prove it, and Dave quoted the invention of memory coils and veritoid eyes. During that year we swapped knowledge until Dave knew the whole theory of endocrinology, and I could have made Lena from memory. The more we talked, the less sure I grew about the impossibility of *Homo mechanensis* as the perfect type.

Poor Lena. Her cuproberyl body spent half its time in scattered pieces. Our first attempts were successful only in getting her to serve fried brushes for breakfast and wash the dishes in oleo oil. Then one day she cooked a perfect dinner with six wires crossed, and Dave was in ecstasy.

He worked all night on her wiring, put in a new coil, and taught her a fresh set of words. And the next day she flew into a tantrum and swore vigorously at us when we told her she wasn't doing her work right.

"It's a lie," she yelled, shaking a suction brush. "You're all liars. If you so-and-so's would leave me whole long enough, I might get something done around the place."

When we calmed her temper and got her back to work, Dave ushered me into the study. "Not taking any chances with Lena," he explained. "We'll have to cut out that adrenal pack and restore her to normality. But we've got to get a better robot. A housemaid mech isn't complex enough."

"How about Dillard's new utility models? They seem to combine everything in one."

"Exactly. Even so, we'll need a special one built to order, with a full range of memory coils. And out of respect to old Lena, let's get a female case for its works."

The result, of course, was Helen. The Dillard people had performed a miracle and put all the works in a girl-modeled case. Even the plastic and rubberite face was designed for flexibility to express emotions, and she was complete with tear glands and taste buds, ready to simulate every human action, from breathing to pulling hair, the bill they sent with her was another miracle, but Dave and I scraped it together; we had to turn Lena over to an exchange to complete it, though, and thereafter we ate out.

I'd performed plenty of delicate operations on living tissues, and some of them had been tricky, but I still felt like a premed student as we opened the front plate of her torso and began to sever the leads of her "nerves." Dave's mechanical glands were all prepared, complex little bundles of pansistors and wires that heterodyned on the electrical thought impulses and distorted them as adrenalin distorts the reaction of human minds.

Instead of sleeping that night, we pored over the schematic diagrams of her structures, tracing the complex thought mazes of her wiring, severing the leaders, implanting the heterones, as Dave called them. And while we worked, a mechanical tape fed carefully prepared thoughts of consciousness and awareness of life and feeling into an auxiliary memory coil. Dave believed in leaving nothing to chance.

It was growing light as we finished, exhausted and exultant. All that remained was the starting of her electr ical power; like all the Dillard mechs, she was equipped with a tiny atomotor instead of batteries, and once started would need no further attention.

Dave refused to turn her on. "Wait until we've slept and rested," he advised. "I'm as eager to try her as you are, but we can't do much studying with our minds half-dead. Turn in, and we'll leave Helen until later."

Even though we were both reluctant to follow it, we knew the idea was sound. We turned in, and sleep hit us before the air conditioner could cut down to sleeping temperature. And then Dave was pounding on my shoulder.

"Phil! Hey, snap out of it!"

I groaned, turned over, and faced him. "Well?...Uh! What is it? Did Helen—"

"No, it's old Mrs. van Styler. She 'visored to say her son has an infatuation for a servant girl, and she wants you to come out and give counterhormones. They're at the summer camp in Maine."

Rich Mrs. van Styler! I couldn't afford to let that account down, now that Helen had used up the last of my funds. But it wasn't a job I cared for.

"Counterhormones! That'll take two weeks' full time. Anyway, I'm no society doctor, messing with glands to keep fools happy. My job's taking care of serious trouble."

"And you want to watch Helen." Dave was grinning, but he was serious, too. "I told her it'd cost her fifty thousand!"

"*Huh?*"

"And she said okay, if you hurried."

Of course, there was only one thing to do, though I could have wrung fat Mrs. van Styler's neck cheerfully. It wouldn't have happened if she'd used robots like everyone else—but she had to be different.

Consequently, while Dave was back home puttering with Helen, I was racking my brain to trick Archy van Styler into getting the counterhormones, and giving the servant girl the same. Oh, I wasn't supposed to, but the poor kid was crazy about Archy. Dave might have written, I thought, but never a word did I get.

It was three weeks later instead of two when I reported that Archy was "cured," and collected on the line. With that money in my pocket, I hired a personal rocket and was back in Messina in half an hour. I didn't waste time in reaching the house.

As I stepped into the alcove, I heard a light patter of feet, and an eager voice called out, "Dave, dear?" For a minute I couldn't answer, and the voice came again, pleading, "Dave?"

I don't know what I expected, but I didn't expect Helen to meet me that way, stopping and staring at me, obvious disappointment on her face, little hands fluttering up against her breast.

"Oh," she cried. "I thought it was Dave. He hardly comes home to eat now, but I've had supper waiting hours." She dropped her hands and managed a smile. "You're Phil, aren't you? Dave told me about you when…at first. I'm so glad to see you home, Phil."

"Glad to see you doing so well, Helen." Now what does one say for light conversation with a robot? "You said something about supper?"

"Oh, yes. I guess Dave ate downtown again, so we might as well go in. It'll be nice having someone to talk to around the house, Phil. You don't mind if I call you Phil, do you? You know, you're sort of a godfather to me."

We ate. I hadn't counted on such behavior, but apparently she considered eating as normal as walking.

She didn't do much eating, at that; most of the time she spent staring at the front door.

Dave came in as we were finishing, a frown a yard wide on his face. Helen started to rise, but he ducked toward the stairs, throwing words over his shoulder. "Hi, Phil. See you up here later." There was something radically wrong with him. For a moment, I'd thought his eyes were haunted, and as I turned to Helen, hers were filling with tears. She gulped, choked them back, and fell to viciously on her food.

"What's the matter with him…and you?" I asked.

"He's sick of me." She pushed her plate away and got up hastily. "You'd better see him while I clean up. And there's nothing wrong with me. And it's not my fault anyway." She grabbed the dishes and ducked into the kitchen; I could have sworn she was crying.

Maybe all thought is a series of conditioned reflexes—but she certainly had picked up a lot of conditioning while I was gone. Lena in her heyday had been nothing like this. I went up to see if Dave could make any sense out of the hodge-podge.

He was squirting soda into a large glass of apple brandy, and I saw that the bottle was nearly empty. "Join me?" he asked.

It seemed like a good idea. The roaring blast of an ion rocket overhead was the only familiar thing left in the house. From the look around Dave's eyes, it wasn't the first bottle he'd emptied while I was gone, and there were more left. He dug out a new bottle for his own drink.

"Of course, it's none of my business, Dave, but that stuff won't steady your nerves any. What's gotten into you and Helen? Been seeing ghosts?"

Helen was wrong; he hadn't been eating downtown—nor anywhere else. His muscles collapsed into a chair in a way that spoke of fatigue and nerves, but mostly of hunger. "You noticed it, eh?"

"Noticed it? The two of you jammed it down my throat."

"Uhmmm." He swatted at a nonexistent fly, and slumped further down in the pneumatic. "Guess maybe I should have waited with Helen until you got back. But if that stereo cast hadn't changed…anyway, it did. And those mushy books of yours finished the job."

"Thanks. That makes it all clear."

"You know, Phil, I've got a place up in the country…fruit ranch. My dad left it to me. Think I'll look it over."

And that's the way it went. But finally, by much liquor and more perspiration, I got some of the story out of him before I gave him an Amytal and put him to bed. Then I hunted up Helen and dug the rest of the story from her, until it made sense.

Apparently as soon as I was gone, Dave had turned her on and made preliminary tests, which were entirely satisfactory. She had reacted beautifully—so well that he decided to leave her and go down to work as usual.

Naturally, with all her untried emotions, she was filled with curiosity, and wanted him to stay. Then he had an inspiration. After showing her what her duties about the house would be, he set her down in front of the stereovisor, tuned in a travelogue, and left her to occupy her time with that.

The travelogue held her attention until it was finished, and the station switched over to a current serial with Larry Ainslee, the same cute emoter who'd given us all the trouble with the twins. Incidentally, he looked something like Dave.

Helen took to the serial like a seal to water. This play-acting was a perfect outlet for her newly excited emotions. When that particular episode finished, she found a love story on another station, and added still more to her education. The afternoon programs were mostly news and music, but by then she'd found my books; and I do have rather adolescent taste in literature.

Dave came home in the best of spirits. The front alcove was neatly swept, and there was the odor of food in the air that he'd missed around the house for weeks. He had visions of Helen as the super-efficient housekeeper.

So it was a shock to him to feel two strong arms around his neck from behind and hear a voice all aquiver coo into his ears, "Oh, Dave, darling. I've missed you so, and I'm so *thrilled* that you're back." Helen's technique may have lacked polish, but it had enthusiasm, as he found when he tried to stop her from kissing him. She had learned fast and furiously—also, Helen was powered by an atomotor.

Dave wasn't a prude, but he remembered that she was only a robot, after all. The fact that she felt, acted, and looked like a young goddess in his arms didn't mean much. With some effort, he untangled her and dragged her off to supper, where he made her eat with him to divert her attention.

After her evening work, he called her into the study and gave her a thorough lecture on the folly of her ways. It must have been good, for it lasted three solid hours, and covered her station in life, the idiocy of stereos, and various other miscellanies. When he finished, Helen looked up with dewy eyes and said wistfully, "I know, Dave, but I still love you." That's when Dave started drinking. It grew worse each day. If he stayed downtown, she was crying when he came home. If he returned on time, she fussed over him and threw herself at him. In his room, with the door locked, he could hear her downstairs pacing up and down and muttering; and when he went down, she stared at him reproachfully until he had to go back up.

I sent Helen out on a fake errand in the morning and got Dave up. With her gone, I made him eat a decent breakfast and gave him a tonic for his nerves. He was still listless and moody.

"Look here, Dave," I broke in on his brooding. "Helen isn't human, after all. Why not cut off her power and change a few memory coils? Then we can convince her that she never was in love and couldn't get that way."

"You try it. I had that idea, but she put up a wail that would wake Homer. She says it would be murder—and the hell of it is that I can't help feeling the same about it. Maybe she isn't human, but you wouldn't guess it when she puts on that martyred look and tells you to go ahead and kill her."

"We never put in substitutes for some of the secretions present in man during the love period."

"I don't know what we put in. Maybe the heterones backfired or something. Anyway, she's made this idea so much a part of her thoughts that we'd have to put in a whole new set of coils."

"Well, why not?"

"Go ahead. You're the surgeon of this family. I'm not used to fussing with emotions. Matter of fact, since she's been acting this way, I'm beginning to hate work on any robot. My business is going to blazes."

He saw Helen coming up the walk and ducked out the back door for the monorail express. I'd intended to put him back in bed, but let him go. Maybe he'd be better off at his shop than at home.

"Dave's gone?" Helen did have that martyred look now.

"Yeah. I got him to eat, and he's gone to work."

"I'm glad he ate." She slumped down in a chair as if she were worn out, though how a mech could be tired beat me. "Phil?"

"Well, what is it?"

"Do you think I'm bad for him? I mean, do you think he'd be happier if I weren't here?"

"He'll go crazy if you keep acting this way around him."

She winced. Those little hands were twisting about pleadingly, and I felt like an inhuman brute. But I'd started, and I went ahead. "Even if I cut out your power and changed your coils, he'd probably still be haunted by you."

"I know. But I can't help it. And I'd make him a good wife, really I would, Phil."

I gulped; this was getting a little too far. "And give him strapping sons to boot, I suppose. A man wants flesh and blood, not rubber and metal."

"Don't, please! I can't think of myself that way; to me, I'm a woman. And you know how perfectly I'm made to imitate a real woman…in all ways. I couldn't give him sons, but in every other way…I'd try so hard, I know I'd make him a good wife."

I gave up.

Dave didn't come home that night, nor the next day. Helen was fussing and fuming, wanting me to call the hospitals and the police, but I knew nothing had happened to him. He always carried identification. Still, when he didn't come on the third day, I began to worry. And when Helen started out for his shop, I agreed to go with her.

Dave was there, with another man I didn't know. I parked Helen where he couldn't see her, but where she could hear, and went in as soon as the other fellow left.

Dave looked a little better and seemed glad to see me. "Hi, Phil—just closing up. Let's go eat."

Helen couldn't hold back any longer, but came trooping in. "Come on home, Dave. I've got roast duck with spice stuffing, and you know you love that."

"Scat!" said Dave. She shrank back, turned to go. "Oh, all right, stay. You might as well hear it, too. I've sold the shop. The fellow you saw just bought it, and I'm going up to the old fruit ranch I told you about, Phil. I can't stand the mechs any more."

"You'll starve to death at that," I told him.

"No, there's a growing demand for old-fashioned fruit, raised out of doors. People are tired of this water-culture stuff. Dad always made a living out of it. I'm leaving as soon as I can get home and pack."

Helen clung to her idea. "I'll pack, Dave, while you eat. I've got apple cobbler for dessert." The world was toppling under her feet, but she still remembered how crazy he was for apple cobbler.

Helen was a good cook; in fact she was a genius, with all the good points of a woman and a mech combined. Dave ate well enough, after he got started. By the time supper was over, he'd thawed out enough to admit he liked the duck and cobbler, and to thank her for packing. In fact, he even let her kiss him good-bye, though he firmly refused to let her go to the rocket field with him.

Helen was trying to be brave when I got back, and we carried on a stumbling conversation about Mrs. van Styler's servants for a while. But the talk began to lull, and she sat staring out of the window at nothing most of the time. Even the stereo comedy lacked interest for her, and I was glad enough to have her go off to her room. She could cut her power down to simulate sleep when she chose.

As the days slipped by, I began to realize why she couldn't believe herself a robot. I got to thinking of her as a girl and companion myself. Except for odd intervals when she went off by herself to brood, or when she kept going to the telescript for a letter that never came, she was as good a companion as a man could ask. There was something homey about the place that Lena had never put there.

I took Helen on a shopping trip to Hudson and she giggled and purred over the wisps of silk and glassheen that were the fashion, tried on endless hats, and conducted herself as any normal girl might. We went trout fishing for a day, where she proved to be as good a sport and as sensibly silent as a man. I thoroughly enjoyed myself and thought she was forgetting Dave. That was before I came home unexpectedly and found her doubled up on the couch, threshing her legs up and down and crying to the high heavens.

It was then I called Dave. They seemed to have trouble in reaching him, and Helen came over beside me while I waited. She was tense and fidgety as an old maid trying to propose. But finally they located Dave.

"What's up, Phil?" he asked as his face came on the viewplate. "I was just getting my things together to—"

I broke him off. "Things can't go on the way they are, Dave. I've made up my mind. I'm yanking Helen's coils tonight. It won't be worse than what she's going through now."

Helen reached up and touched my shoulder. "Maybe that's best, Phil. I don't blame you."

Dave's voice cut in. "Phil, you don't know what you're doing!"

"Of course, I do. It'll all be over by the time you can get here. As you heard, she's agreeing."

There was a black cloud sweeping over Dave's face. "I won't have it, Phil. She's half mine and I forbid it!"

"Of all the—"

"Go ahead, call me anything you want. I've changed my mind. I was packing to come home when you called."

Helen jerked around me, her eyes glued to the panel. "Dave, do you… are you—"

"I'm just waking up to what a fool I've been, Helen. Phil, I'll be home in a couple of hours, so if there's anything—"

He didn't have to chase me out. But I heard Helen cooing something about loving to be a rancher's wife before I could shut the door.

Well, I wasn't as surprised as they thought. I think I knew when I called Dave what would happen. No man acts the way Dave had been acting because he hates a girl; only because he thinks he does—and thinks wrong.

No woman ever made a lovelier bride or a sweeter wife. Helen never lost her flair for cooking and making a home. With her gone, the old house seemed empty, and I began to drop out to the ranch once or twice a week. I suppose they had trouble at times, but I never saw it, and I know the neighbors never suspected they were anything but normal man and wife.

Dave grew older, and Helen didn't, of course. But between us, we put lines in her face and grayed her hair without letting Dave know that she wasn't growing old with him; he'd forgotten that she wasn't human, I guess.

I practically forgot, myself. It wasn't until a letter came from Helen this morning that I woke up to reality. There, in her beautiful script, just a trifle shaky in places, was the inevitable that neither Dave nor I had seen.

> Dear Phil,
>
> As you know, Dave has had heart trouble for several years now. We expected him to live on just the same, but it seems that wasn't to be. He died in my arms just before sunrise. He sent you his greetings and farewell.
>
> I've one last favor to ask of you, Phil. There is only one thing for me to do when this is finished. Acid will burn out metal as well as flesh, and I'll be dead with Dave. Please see that we are buried together, and that the morticians do not find my secret. Dave wanted it that way, too.
>
> Poor, dear Phil. I know you loved Dave as a brother, and how you felt about me. Please don't grieve too much for us, for we have had a happy life together, and both feel that we should cross this last bridge side by side.
>
> With love and thanks from
>
> Helen

It had to come sooner or later, I suppose, and the first shock has worn off now. I'll be leaving in a few minutes to carry out Helen's last instructions.

Dave was a lucky man, and the best friend I ever had. And Helen—well, as I said, I'm an old man now, and can view things more sanely, I should have married and raised a family, I suppose. But…there was only one Helen O'Loy.

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-SHS

LESTER DEL REY

(1915–1993)

Depending on when you asked him, the author of the stories in this book may have been born Ramon Felipe San Juan Mario Silvio Enrico Smith Heathcourt-Brace Sierra y Alvarez del Rey y de los Uerdes or he may have been born Leonard Knapp. But by the time he sold his first story in 1938, he was known as Lester del Rey.

Del Rey's novels covered the SF genre, from juveniles like *Police Your Planet* and *Attack from Atlantis* to adult fare such as *Nerves* and *Pstalemate.*

By the early 1950s, del Rey was well-known as a science fiction writer and as an editor of magazines such as *Space SF, Fantasy Fiction, Science Fiction Adventure, Rocket Stories,* and *Fantasy Fiction* (often under a variety of other pseudonyms.)

After he married Judy-Lynn Benjamin, the couple founded del Rey books, a major science fiction imprint which is now part of Random House.

In 1972 Lester del Rey was awarded the Skylark Award by NESFA. In 1991 he received the SFWA Grand Master Award.

JOHN PICACIO

John Picacio is a World Fantasy Award-winning and Hugo Award-nominated illustrator of science fiction, fantasy, and horror literature. His artwork has illustrated the covers of books by Michael Moorcock, Harlan Ellison, Robert Silverberg, L.E. Modesitt, Jr., Dan Simmons, Joe R. Lansdale, Jeffrey Ford, Frederik Pohl, James Tiptree, Jr., Mark Chadbourn, and many more. His accolades include the Locus Award, the Chesley Award, and two International Horror Guild Awards—all in the Artist category. He's been nominated five consecutive years for the Hugo. For more info, please visit www.johnpicacio.com.

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